

**Before You Divorce - Read This!**  
**By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.**

January and February seem to be a common time for people to get divorced. While many conflicted and combative couples may have stayed together through the holidays to not disappoint the kids or the extended family members, or have not had the money to get divorced before now, others who find themselves divorced at this time, may have not even been thinking about divorce, until they began to feel discouraged, disappointed, and disenchanted after the holidays. While there are very good reasons for divorce, personal unhappiness may not be caused by your marriage and divorce may not be the solution.

It is unlikely that your marriage is the source of all of your unhappiness. However, your marriage may be on life support or may even be lifeless. If you are not being verbally, emotionally, sexually, or physically abused, but still feel flat and empty, the source of your distress may involve other factors besides your marriage. It is easy to attribute the source of your distress to the marriage when you feel taken for granted, held back, or neglected. It is easier to look outside the self, instead of inside. Many people focus their disappointment, sadness, and anger on their relationships.

It is relatively easy to identify disappointments in your relationship. This sense that something is missing, yet not knowing the identity of that something may lead you to conclude that "I'm just not happy". It is convenient to expect your spouse and kids to make you happy, but in reality, happiness is an inside job and you are responsible for making yourself happy.

When you are trying to get to the root of your unhappiness, you may be asking yourself what you have to be miserable about. You don't really argue or fight with your spouse, although you do seem to stay busy all the time and not really make time for each other. While you are not feeling loved or appreciated, you probably are not making the effort to show your spouse that you love and appreciate him/her either, or to even talk about your needs in the relationship.

If you look really close, you may discover that you are not taking time for your own self care either. Maybe you have a vague desire to exercise more, improve your grooming routine, pay more attention to current events, put together your family pictures, or learn something new. You have thought about these things but have not made any real effort to get started. So far, they are just random ideas floating around in your head. You have not really talked about them. If you have discussed them with your spouse and s/he didn't seem interested, that only stood to reaffirm that you are not getting your needs met in this relationship.

You may also be expecting your spouse to read your mind about what you need and to grant those needs/wishes without being asked. When you stop talking about what is going on in your life, the gap between the two of you gets wider and wider. These simple thoughts, dreams, goals, along with feelings, shared memories, and memories that are uniquely yours, may have been the kinds of things that you and your spouse talked

about -- way back when you were talking to each other. Just simple things really--things that connect you in emotionally intimate ways. Now you keep them to yourself.

If you clue your partner in on the fact that you are not happy, the relationship can serve as a source of support, so that you can regain your sense of happiness or joy. The emotional closeness that you had can be restored. Once upon a time, it felt natural to just spend time together, just "being" and loving each other. These days, you may have to plan for it.

You may have even made some minor attempts at trying to reconnect. If in the past, your attempts at "date night" ended up being a superficial recount of the weather, kids, and chores, the routine may have evaporated due to lack of interest. When your efforts are not working, sometimes you have to do more. You can begin to reinvest in your own happiness and to reinvest in your life together. You can start dual, overlapped campaigns. Someone who is unhappy can begin an earnest effort at improving self care while taking action to revitalize the marriage. The "spark" can be rekindled by carving out a "special time" for your relationship and making it a priority. Both of these campaigns can reinforce and strengthen each other.

Telling your partner about your feelings, goals, thoughts, needs, and desires, helps to achieve those goals and reinforces self-efficacy. Working on yourself gives you more to talk about with your spouse.

You can invest in yourself and your own happiness while investing in your relationship. It is not necessarily an "either/or" thing. Your spouse may not even know that you are unhappy. There are at least three marriages in a marriage—His, Hers, and the one observed by others. One partner can feel very happy and secure while the other one is miserable. The one that feels happy is often completely unaware that his/her partner is getting ready to leave the relationship.

The key to finding your joy is to start communicating. Communicate with your partner, and communicate with yourself. Start asking the important questions: What is missing? What do I want? What will make me happy? What do I need to do to change? Chances are that a divorce will not make you happy.

If you need help opening up the lines of communication with your partner, setting aside a "Sacred time" (i.e. selecting a time that will take precedence over all conflicting demands), sets up a routine that encourages follow through. Structured or semi-structured communication exercises such as "Couples Feelings Meetings" and "The Honey Jar" enable you to get started in a neutral way, that also increases the probability of following through. The "Honey Jar" is a conversation starter for couples, that assists in opening up those lines of communication and restoring the sense of "Us" that may be eroding. "The Honey Jar" helps you start talking again, about yourself and the relationship in a way that is non-threatening.