

The Key To Successful Recovery of Your Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

The key to successfully recovering the love that has eroded is within you. The fun that you once shared together can happen again. The robust sense of "us" that colored the choices you made on a daily basis can be restored. The ability to accomplish these things is within each partner. The key to restoring marital happiness is not dependent upon what your partner is doing. It is not about how much money you have (or how much debt). It is not about how the household chores are divided (equally or not). It is not even about how much time you spend together.

The key to marital happiness is about you being able to take personal responsibility. Taking personal responsibility implies that you are able to take responsibility for your own feelings, decisions, behavior, happiness (or misery). Taking personal responsibility means that you accept your own part in the problems in the relationship and your part in the solutions. It means that you take ownership of your responsibilities regardless of whether your spouse is taking ownership of his/hers.

When you take responsibility for your own decisions, feelings, and behavior, you stop blaming and holding the other person responsible for the solution. When you are blaming and expecting the other person to change so that you CAN change, you are anything BUT taking personal responsibility. Many an endless power struggle gets played out over who is right and who is wrong. The longer the power struggle and blaming goes on, the polarized the couple becomes, and the more difficult to break the impasse.

If and when you take responsibility for your feelings, you can begin to identify the feeling, the thoughts behind the feelings, and any unresolved issues that pre-dispose you toward certain ways of looking at things ("filters") and resulting, predictable emotional responses. When you know what those filters are, you can begin neutralize them. Much of the time filters operate beyond your awareness, but becoming aware of them enables you to challenge any distortions in your thinking that set you up for emotional pain, misunderstanding, and over/under-reactions.

When you take personal responsibility for your feelings, you can treat uncomfortable feelings as a problem to be solved -- a problem that you alone are responsible for solving. Despite what you want to believe, no one can fix your feelings. No one makes you feel the feelings you have. Even when your partner knows where your sensitivities lie, you can choose to change how you perceive his/her attempt to get a certain reaction from you, and/or how you respond to those attempts. You are responsible not only for how you feel; you are responsible for your responses.

You constantly make decisions about how you will respond to relationship events. Much of the time, your decisions and responses become so overused that they become fairly fixed and predictable. Your partner, exhibiting his/her own fixed, predictable

responses contributes to the self-perpetuating relationship patterns that may be dragging you as a couple down. So, how do I make my partner take responsibility for his/her fixed, predictable ways of interacting? You don't.

Its funny how, when I talk about the need to take personal responsibility for one's own feelings, decisions, and behavior, that spouses identify the other spouse's need to do that. It is commonplace for each partner to justify entirely their own negative, counter-therapeutic behavior as a contributing piece of an escalating argument while condemning the exact same behavior in the partner. It is, of course, the partner's behavior that is causing the problem. How can you solve a problem if it belongs to someone else?

You cannot make your partner change. You can, however, change yourself. You can change by accepting personal responsibility. How do you accept personal responsibility? Stop trying to figure out what your partner is doing and ask yourself the same questions? What is my part in this problem? What am I doing that is not helping? What am I doing/saying/feeling that is making things worse? What are my feelings? What can I do about my feelings? How can I change my responses or my behavior?

Get after it. Each time that you do the same old things over and over again, you make it harder to do something different next time.



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