

# FIRST AID FOR MARRIAGE

written by Eric Bird



## Can I really help?

That depends, not on your professional training or lack of it, but more on the kind of person you are.

If you are the kind of person someone would turn to if they had difficulties, then you are most likely to have the personal qualities needed. People would not usually open up to an unsympathetic hearer. Would you?

If you are married, the person who turns to you may well have noticed things about your relationship that have given them the confidence to talk to you. They may be able to see that you and your spouse get on well together, spend time together, do not complain about each other, or it may be that you have overcome some quite serious difficulties within your own marriage.

You will be able to help not because you are an expert, but because of your experience of life – however, do not assume that other people’s experiences are going to be just the same as yours!

It is appropriate for people to help those of their own sex, or for a husband and wife to share in giving help to their friends. Avoid one to one meetings with someone of the opposite sex, who is married to someone else. This can lead to trouble even with professional helpers. Don’t even think about it!

## What is expected of me?

For some people, it will be nothing more than listening properly; for others, a little more. People may expect too much from us, yet in this sort of situation we do not need to provide all the answers! The couple who are in trouble are going to have to find the answers themselves, with your gentle guidance. All we need to do is point them in the right direction.

They may want you to rescue them. Do not even be tempted to try. They must realise that only they can rescue themselves. No one else can. Do not get trapped in a place where you are expected to “fix” their marriage. You cannot, so do not let them think you can!

Things rarely change overnight, so prepare them for the long haul. Things didn’t go wrong suddenly, so don’t expect them to be put right in an instant.

## **Try to avoid taking sides**

One partner may be better known to you than the other. Do not take sides. Remain impartial and give each one a fair hearing. One may seem to be the victim, the other the abuser – but do not jump to conclusions. We must try to see things from each point of view, and may never be really sure who is right and who is wrong.

*Is one right and one wrong? Are they both right and both wrong? Think about this couple:*

- If she has an affair because he spends his spare time at the pub without her and comes home drunk – who is in the wrong?
- If he goes to the pub because she always nags him and puts him down and rejects him, who is in the wrong?
- If she resents him because as soon as they got married he started taking her for granted, admiring other women, criticising her cooking and never offering help with anything, who is in the wrong?
- If, contrary to the advice of friends and parents, she married him after only knowing him a few weeks, who is in the wrong?

*Deciding who is to blame is too difficult – so don't even try!*

One spouse may be more ready to talk than the other. Try, if possible, to hear both points of view. Rarely, if ever, is a situation completely one-sided. Part of the problem is that people find it difficult to see the other's point of view, so don't make it worse by taking sides.

If you listen to each of them separately you'll be amazed at the difference between their points of view. If you listen to them together try to give each of them the chance to say their piece. Explain to them, if necessary, that in order to help, you must avoid taking sides.

## **Listening**

In many cases, all they need is someone who will listen to them. It will help them to think things through as they talk to you. One of the problems they may have is that they feel their partner never listens. It may take a lot of pressure off them to know you are listening. Of course this is only going to help in the short term, but it may reduce the tension and allow one of them to calm down.

In this sort of situation, you may find that you are taking on board some of their anger, frustration and disappointment. This may be good for your friend but not for you! A real danger is that in taking upon yourself the other person's bad feelings you find yourself off-loading it on to your own husband or wife! After meeting the couple (or either one of them) it is good to make a deliberate effort to change back from the helper role to your own role as husband or wife. Take the burden off your own shoulders but do not put it on your spouse!

There are ways of listening. People need to know that you are interested. Try to find a quiet place, where you can give your whole attention to their problems. Your body language will often indicate how interested you are, so listen carefully and be real.

Few of us are naturally good listeners. Many people feel they have never been properly listened to in their lives. It could be of great significance to the couple that you have given them time. Strangely, just because you have listened, they will probably think you are a great conversationalist!

The way you listen may help them to learn to listen to each other –

- Concentrate on understanding what they are trying to say.
- Do not think about what you're going to say next.
- Ask for clarification if you are not sure what they mean.
- Try feeding back what you think they meant so that they can confirm or correct it.
- Ask questions, but avoid if possible the sort of questions that can be answered by 'yes' or 'no'.

When you have listened carefully, ask if they found the listening helpful. Suggest that they might try it with their partner - that is listening rather than talking.

Listening is the key to good communication – the receiving set is as important as the transmitter! Even if a TV programme is superbly filmed and edited, and is broadcast by a powerful transmitter, the quality of the picture will depend on the receiving set in your living room being tuned in properly. It is just the same with human conversation. However clearly someone speaks, unless the other person is listening carefully the message will not be received as it was intended.

### **Where are they coming from, and where do they want to go?**

If you have gained the confidence of at least one of them, by sensitive listening, then find out if they are willing to talk things through together. If one of them is reluctant, make it clear that you consider their opinion just as important as the other's, in fact, necessary for you to get a balanced picture, because you don't want to take sides.

Whether or not you can get them together, try to discover what they originally expected from their marriage, what has changed and how serious they each are about trying to make the marriage work.

Ask them gently and sensitively, the following questions, *(or use your own words)*:

- How important to them is their marriage?
- If they made vows at their wedding, did they mean them?
- What has changed?
- Who has changed?
- When did things first start to go wrong?

Sometimes talking these things through in the safety that you provide by your neutrality and concern goes a long way towards their mutual understanding. This is especially true in the early stages of difficulty when the level of pain and distress is not yet too severe. Often they will discover that there is still a depth of love which they believed was lost forever.

Are they considering temporary separation or even divorce? If they are, then we have the opportunity to put before them the less attractive aspects of that course of action.

Marriage is more than just a personal arrangement between two people who fall in love. It is a major part of the social fabric of the nation.

The Exeter Family Study shows the impact of divorce on children. Nearly three times as many children of divorced parents were reported as unhappy and more than twice as many were referred to psychiatric services. These children were twice as likely to have a low self-image, three times as likely to have a poor social life, three times as likely to perform poorly at school, four times as likely to have behaviour problems and twice as likely to suffer ill-health, as those from families where Mum and Dad stayed together. They also report that conflict between parents usually continues, sometimes actually increasing, following a divorce.

The Report "Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation" shows the risk of premature death is greatly increased for divorced people. In certain age groups the risk is nearly double.

*Falling in love just 'happens'. Staying together in a loving relationship needs effort!*

Sadly most people do not learn from a first marital breakdown. On average second marriages last only half as long as first marriages. People simply take all the personal faults they brought into the first marriage into the second, but with a poor track record behind them.

If your couple have serious difficulties, try to persuade them to go for marriage counselling. All too often couples wait until they are considering divorce before they think about professional help. The sooner they get the help they need, the less help they will need!

### **Different is not necessarily wrong**

We naturally think that the way we do things is right and if someone else does it differently, this is wrong. Of course some things are right or wrong, but others are just different. Opposites may attract – but can they live together? In the closeness of living together the differences seem to get larger.

*There are three major areas where differences are not wrong, but where they are not always easy to handle.*

### *Differences of personality type:*

Introverts and extroverts frequently find each other attractive, each seeming to supply something they see as lacking in themselves. This is fine except that they will often want to do different things. One likes to be surrounded by people, whilst the other likes plenty of personal space. It is all too easy to see the other as being wrong, when they may simply be different. There are many other personality differences for example (morning person or evening person) which whilst not being a question of right or wrong are certainly real differences.

### *Differences of background:*

What kind of role models did their parents give. Children react in different ways to role models – either they copy them, and become like their parents or rebel against them, determined to be different. Either way the influence is very strong. Here are four typical parental role models:

- Easy going Mother/Bossy Father
- Easy going Father/Bossy Mother
- Two separate people living under one roof
- A partnership of mutual support

Also minor issues cause problems. Because things were done at home in a particular way in the past, we assume that this was right. For example – is it the man's or the woman's job to put out the refuse bin? Or, should the pots be dried or left to drain on the rack?

### *Differences between the sexes:*

There are plenty of books, two of which are listed at the end, on the subject ('Men are from Mars: Women are from Venus' and 'You just don't understand'). We know we are equal, but equal does not mean the same!

A few examples:

- In general rule women express their feelings easily within a relationship, whilst men are more likely to hide emotion. Men are therefore less likely to acknowledge problems at the outset.
- As a rule women are more interested in people and men in things.
- It has often been said that women can do several things at once, whereas men focus on the task in hand.

Of course, there are exceptions, but in general such things hold.

The problem with most of these things is that they can't be changed. "Who does what" type of disputes can be sorted out by the couple themselves, if they are willing to listen to each other, but the more important differences will remain.

All you can do is to try to help them to see the differences in each other, and where change is unlikely or impossible, to accept that that is the way it is. To be different is not to be wrong. And “equal” does not mean “the same”.

## **Handling conflict**

Conflicts will surface over all sorts of issues. The most serious ones usually centre around money, sex and children. As you listen to the problem from both sides try not to get too bogged down in the detail. So often the issue is simply “I want to have my own way”. Here we have the root of the problem – selfishness.

We should not deny that these problems are real. For example, conflict may arise over the wrong partner handling the family finances, when their true strengths lie elsewhere. Maybe the sexual demands of one are quite unreasonable. Perhaps the couple have differing views on child-rearing, based on their own childhood experiences. You may be able to offer help, or you may choose to refer them to a counsellor with specific training in such areas. Often the couple simply are not listening to each other and view their spouse as a rival or a competitor, not as a partner.

When the conflicts are not too severe, there are some simple things we can suggest. A fire is easy to put out when it's only just started. Try to get the couple to stand back from their conflicts, especially if they disagree in front of you. Help them to identify a pattern of where things usually begin to go wrong. What actually triggers real conflict? What turns a discussion into an argument or a fight? Suggest that when an argument starts one of them tries something different. One of them has to break the cycle somewhere.

How easy is it to say: “I was wrong. I'm sorry”?

How easy is it to say: “I forgive you”?

If they do not break the conflict cycle with an apology and forgiveness, then anger is likely to be pushed down inside and make conflict more likely next time.

These things sound harder than they are. The words are quite simple but they can make a profound difference. And they are just as habit forming as arguments and fights! Just making a different response, where you know that the usual response will always cause trouble can have an amazing effect. For 20 years a couple argued over the husband's habit of burying himself behind the newspaper at breakfast time. One day he did something different – he took the paper to work to read at lunchtime. Result: no more arguments and he still read the paper.

Often problems arise from the couple looking at situations from different angles. A house looks different from the back compared to the front – but it is the same house – it just depends where you are standing. Encourage them to see this and to try to look at the situation from each other's point of view.

*What is the difference between these statements?*

“You never help with the washing up”.

“I would really enjoy it if we could do the washing up together sometimes”.

The first one says **You** have a problem – you’re lazy or selfish.

The second one says **I** have a problem – I’m finding it difficult to manage without your help.

How a message is received is so important. Maybe the couple just don’t think about things enough before they speak.

If there is evidence of real violence it may be right for the abused person to get help from the Police or Social Services.

## **Life Events**

There are certain major events or periods of life which have a significant impact on a marriage.

One of the biggest of these is the birth of a child. This always changes the shape of a family. Whilst a couple without children can spend much of their time doing what pleases them, helping and supporting each other, a couple with a child find they can’t. Suddenly there is a totally helpless, messy and demanding individual making life complicated. For the next 20 years or so this person will receive much from his or her parents, but will give little back, especially in terms of emotional support, finance and practical help! This is very draining for the parents, but little can be done to ease the situation. Either parent (but more often the father) may be jealous of the attention that the child is receiving. Either parent (but more often the mother) may feel unsupported and alone with the demands of the child. Unless couples realise that this disruption to their lives is normal, and that their feelings are mirrored in other families, it can cause so much resentment that it will contribute to breakdown or even cause the marriage to end.

What can be done about it? First of all, couples need to be realistic about the seriousness of the impact a baby makes on their relationship. They need to talk together about the consequences for each of them and the changes they need to make – without blaming the other for the baby’s existence.

Selfishness and demanding behaviour from any child are normal. It is not the result of some major genetic defect, unique to the “other” parent! The child will benefit if the parents co-operate and provide a “united front”. If the parents do not agree over discipline, the child as it grows will learn the technique known as “divide and rule”.

There are other issues besides children of course, such as painful anniversaries, bereavement, redundancy, which are best simply talked through between the couple, if only they can do it without blame or scoring points.

## **Intimacy**

The most difficult thing for most couples to discuss is lack of sexual fulfilment. They find it hard to talk about it together and hard to mention it to someone else. If someone does entrust you with this type of problem you may feel uncomfortable, embarrassed or just plain surprised.

You can ask some simple questions, as well as listening. If you feel you do not wish to get involved even slightly, at this level, then suggest that they see a counsellor or sex therapist.

However, if you are brave enough here are some simple suggestions which they might find helpful. Intimacy does not start in bed, but will probably end up there! Intimacy starts with warmth, trust and feeling. Try to take the pressure off them. People are under a lot of pressure to perform (just like it is on the films). Real life is not like that. They need to know the secret: it is to do what pleases their partner. The challenge is to find out what does please their partner.

Many men do not realise how important the wellbeing of the whole relationship is, for most women, before intimacy is reached.

Statistics show that on average, most married or co-habiting couples between the ages of 25 and 50 have sex about five times a month. See "Sexual Behaviour in Britain" – in the list at the end.

They may need help in their use of time.

Encourage them to spend time together doing something they both like (e.g. eating out; walking, etc.). They may need to be convinced that this is a priority. What did they talk about when they were dating? Encourage them to take small steps to regain confidence in each other.

If one partner feels under pressure, then to be able to hold hands, kiss or cuddle without the feeling that full sex is expected can be a great relief and lead to growing trust. Where real intimacy has been largely absent, patience and time with each other will help the healing process.

Use your discretion to help them gently forward. It is not necessary to be intrusive or to discuss intimate details. If they need more specialist help, then encourage them to get it, but generally speaking, if the rest of the relationship is improving the physical side will as well.

At all times and on all issues maintain strict confidentiality. Your friends have a right to expect this. Gossiping about them will not only prevent you from helping them but will very likely cause you to lose their friendship and trust.

## **What next?**

You may find that your help, small though it may seem, has really helped the ones who turned to you. On the other hand, it may have caused them to realise that they have problems that do need more specialised attention. If this is the case, then from the basis of trust you have already built, you may be able to recommend to them that they take things a step further. Your encouragement in this could be quite crucial.

If there is even a hint of an underlying medical condition, they need to see their GP. If the problems are purely relational then there are many counselling agencies which could help. A visit to the nearest Citizens Advice Bureau may be useful, or if they are church-goers their minister may be able to make a recommendation. See the page "Helping Marriages in Difficulties" on this website.

If they refuse to accept anything you say, let them know that you are still there if they want to talk again. Remember, if the situation doesn't improve, it's not your fault! The responsibility is entirely their own.

## **Marriage Enhancement**

Most of us will have the car serviced regularly (if only for the MOT). What about marriage? Your friends may not value your help. But things are not what they ought to be. And just as a car that is neglected is more likely to breakdown on the road, so is a neglected marital problem likely to end in divorce. How about suggesting to your friends that they give their marriage a service?

To meet this need various marriage enhancement courses have been produced. **See the page "Marriage Enhancement" on the Marriage Resource website [www.marriageresource.org.uk](http://www.marriageresource.org.uk)** . These courses are usually either provided by organisations on a residential weekend or a midweek break, or on a series of weeknights usually by a local church, both for their members and for non-members. These courses are designed to make any marriage better, whether or not there are problems. Child-minding may be needed to enable couples to participate. Do encourage you friends to give their marriage a service – the benefits last for years!

## USEFUL BOOKS

**"The Exeter Family Study"** by Cockett and Tripp, published by the Department of Child Health Post-Graduate Medical School, University of Exeter, Heavitree, Exeter EX2 5SQ

**"Marital Breakdown and the Health of the Nation"** published by One Plus One, 12 New Burlington Street, London W1X 1FE

**"Men Are From Mars; Women Are From Venus"** by Dr John Gray, published by Thorsons

**"You Just Don't Understand"** by Deborah Tannen, published by Virago

**"Sexual Behaviour in Britain"** (The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles), by Wellings, Field, Johnson and Wadsworth, published by Penguin.

**"Man to Man About Women"** by Dr James Dobson, published by Word.

**"The Sixty Minute Marriage"** by Rob Parsons, published by Hodder & Stoughton

**"The Marriage Book"** by Nicky and Sila Lee, published by HTB Publications

**"The Highway Code for Marriage"** by Michael and Hilary Perrott, published by CWR

**"I married you"** by Walter Trobisch, published by IVP

**"The Act of Marriage"** (on sex) by Tim and Beverly LaHaye, published by Zondervan

**"How to save your marriage alone"** by Ed Wheat, published by Zondervan

**"The Divorce Remedy"** by Michele Weiner Davis, published by Simon and Schuster

**"Mentoring Marriages"** by Harry Benson, published by Monarch