

To Separate or Not To Separate?

Most pastors and marriage counselors recommend that a couple stay together to work out major conflicts. Their rationale is that issues are best dealt with face-to-face instead of at a distance, with two people working together to come to a mutual understanding. This is true in most safe relationships.

However in an abusive situation, it is sometimes healthy and wise to separate, with the separation having a structure and a goal for the restoration of the relationship, if at all possible.

If you are in a 15-round prize fight, there's nothing wrong with going into the corner where supportive people throw ice on your face, give you nourishment, heal you, stitch up your wounds, and provide advice so you can stay on your feet and be safe in the next round.

Separations are worthless when people use them just to escape from the pain for a while instead of working on the problems. Then when they go back home, nothing has changed and another separation is inevitable.

Some people bail out without making any effort to work through painful issues. They say things like, "I never want to talk to that slime-ball again!" or "He's ruined my life, so I'm going to give him a taste of his own medicine."

A good separation has to have a structure with particular goals and tasks for each side, some rules by which they both abide, and a time table to evaluate their progress. If there is a lot of conflict, the parties may need to agree to meet only with a referee (a counselor or an objective third party) for a few months.

Often when a wife separates from an abusive or alcoholic husband, he insists upon her immediate return. He may promise to change and beg for forgiveness. His desire to restore the relationship should be validated, but it is just the start to rebuilding a broken, damaged relationship.

In a "Monday Night Solutions" talk, Dr. Henry Cloud gave the following illustration: "*The greater the chaos, the greater the structure that is needed. If you get hit by a car, you don't need a bandaid from Rite-Aid. You need a very structured environment that is germ-free (nobody there to hurt you, no new toxins) where experts will help you heal.*"

If you are trying to decide whether to separate from a troubled marriage, here are some guidelines:

- Are you and your children physically safe if you remain in your home? If not, find a safe place immediately and surround yourself with people you can trust as you begin to heal and work on hard issues from a safe distance.
- Does your husband seem willing to seek help through a pastor or counselor? If so, and *if it is safe*, stay put, be willing to admit your part of the problem, and commit to working on specific issues until they are resolved.
- Don't rely on feelings! Anger and discontent can cloud your judgment and entice you with the message that you deserve to be happy, and happiness can only be found if you leave. If you are physically safe, it will be worth the effort it takes to stay and work closely together.
- Are you emotionally stable? If you are having anxiety attacks or suffering physical ailments from repeated verbal or emotional abuse, it may be wise to retreat to a safe place where you can heal and become stronger emotionally and spiritually before you return.

Goals for Separation (example):

- Safety from physical or repeated emotional abuse
- Time to heal physically, emotionally and spiritually (6-12 months recommended if dealing with physical abuse or addictions).

- Discover the real issues in the breakdown of the relationship, seek help to resolve them and make lasting changes in behavior and attitude.
- Reconciliation, if possible

Structure of Separation (example):

- Decide where each party will live and how communication will take place. If you are afraid of further physical abuse, either file for a protective order or agree that you will not meet except in a public place or with a third party present.
- If children are involved, agree on a visitation schedule. If violence is an issue, plan to meet in a public place to drop off or pick up the children.
- Decide whether or not you will be counseled jointly or separately. In most domestic violence cases, it is recommended that counseling begin separately.
- Agree on financial issues such as who will pay the bills, child support, etc. while you are separated. If you are unable to agree on anything, meet with a third party (pastor, counselor, attorney).
- Determine at what time intervals you will evaluate whether reconciliation should take place.

Rules (example):

- Verbal, emotional or physical abuse will not be tolerated by either party.
- Each party will take responsibility for their part of the problem, and will work diligently until real change has occurred.

Tasks (example):

- Abuser must attend domestic violence counseling (or alcoholic must attend AA meetings) for a specific time.
- Victim must attend a support group or receive counseling for a specific time.

The goals, rules, and structure will be different for each relationship and should contain flexibility and grace.