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The Importance of Couples Counseling

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Through the years I have noticed a disturbing trend. All too often, couples who could have worked to improve and restore their relationship instead take the path of least resistance and split up. When children are involved, I consider this lack of effort to be a serious transgression.

Of course there are legitimate reasons to terminate a relationship quickly. If there is any kind of physical abuse, unremitting verbal abuse, continuous cheating and deception, or other serious issues, leaving is necessary and understandable. But sometimes one partner doesn't indicate the depths of his unhappiness with the relationship. This person continues to harbor secret resentment and builds up a hidden case against his partner, silently gathering evidence for his discontent. Then, without warning he announces he wants to leave.

Many men, especially, are not comfortable discussing feelings and processing issues with their mates. They want to avoid confrontation and don't feel well-equipped to problem-solve emotional matters. This is a generalization, to be sure, since there are some men who are quite adept at communicating their feelings and there are some women who are not.

As recent cases in the media have demonstrated, some people act out their needs and frustrations instead of dealing with them directly. They have multiple sexual affairs, they lead secret lives, and in doing so, they denigrate their partners. The irony is that it is after they are caught lying and cheating that they enter treatment for their underlying emotional issues. Perhaps if they had gotten effective help before their lives unraveled they could have salvaged their relationships.

I have worked with many women and men who have been left behind and puzzled because they had no idea that anything was seriously wrong with their relationship. There were no big arguments, serious discussions, or indications that their partner was dissatisfied.

Kathy was married to Don for twenty-two years. They had two teenage children and had lived in the same house and community for fourteen years. Don was a partner in a law firm and Kathy worked part-time as a design consultant. Kathy had followed Don and his career, moving four times throughout the country before eventually settling down.

One Saturday when Don was working, Kathy decided to surprise him at the office with a picnic lunch. She was completely shocked and distraught to literally stumble upon Don in a compromising position with his married secretary. Afterwards, Don confessed that he was in love with this other woman. He and his secretary divorced their spouses and eventually got married.

Not only was this horribly sad for Kathy, but their children also felt betrayed and abandoned. If only Don had gone for individual or couples counseling when he initially felt dissatisfaction with his marriage, or when he became attracted to his secretary, this couple may have been able to work through this rough patch. Couples owe it to their children to do everything they can to preserve their relationship.

I'm seeing another victim of this type of ambushing now. Kevin's wife complained occasionally about minor issues, but was seemingly busy at home with their three small children. When she announced she wanted a divorce and had fallen in love with another man, Kevin was incredulous. Shana acknowledged that Kevin was a wonderful person and father. In his mind they had been close and loving, planning for their future. Shana had never indicated a lot of dissatisfaction with their relationship nor had she suggested contacting a couples' therapist. It is hard to reconcile such behavior when it impacts three young children as well as a spouse.

This is not to say that people won't fall in love with others and choose to leave their relationships and children. But it is the failure to first address the feelings that may lead up to this decision that is especially troublesome.

We are the center of our children's worlds. We owe it to them to do everything we can to keep them safe and secure.

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