

## **AT THE HEART OF A HEALTHY MARRIAGE**

By Dvora Levy, LCSW

The initial image that came to mind was of a heart surgeon losing his patient on the operating table. That is what I was thinking when Sara called me saying she had decided to divorce Avi. They had begun therapy ten weeks prior. It was to be a last attempt at saving the marriage, but I knew at the time that my work was cut out for me. At a certain point in a relationship, when there has been a history of discord, feelings of misunderstandings and lots of hurt, it can happen that one or both partners shut down emotionally. They stop caring. It then becomes very hard to engage in the therapy process, open up to past hurts and be willing to see if a new, more satisfying way of being in the relationship is possible. With three children in the picture and a commitment to the value of staying married, this couple was giving their marriage one last try. Ten weeks later- the decision to divorce.

Sara had suffered enough from Avi's lack of emotional availability and found that she could not use the therapy to open herself up to him and risk more hurt. This was a blow to Avi. He'd had anger issues and difficulty understanding Sara's emotions, but he had been working very hard in treatment to understand what his wife needed. In our 10 weeks together I had reflected back to each spouse what I saw to be their negative cycle, a self-perpetuating pattern of actions and reactions that cause great distress. They had started to hear each other from a more understanding place, drop their defensive postures and empathize with each other. But it was too late for this marriage. Hopefully they will use the insights they obtained into themselves and each other while in therapy to reduce any conflict that may arise between them as they embark on the challenging journey of dissolving their marriage. They may also find that other significant relationships will improve.

Don't wait till it's too late. Getting to the "point of no return" takes time, years really, of hurts and misunderstandings that never get resolved. When there is a history of feeling devalued, unheard, disrespected etc. we become so sensitized and self protective that we react to anything that triggers these feelings instantaneously either with anger or withdrawal. Reactions occur within split seconds; our response comes before we even understand fully the intent behind what our partner is saying. This is the negative cycle that so often couples struggle with and is very difficult to exit.

Couples know when their relationship starts feeling distant or tension-filled, but they often delay getting help. Sometimes it's because of the money involved; sometimes it's the time commitment. At times one spouse just isn't listening when the other says he or she is unhappy. There is so much at stake in building a strong marriage relationship — one based on respect and appreciation — including each spouse's mental health and well-being and a sense of security for the children. If there are two people willing to make changes and work on their relationship and they are prepared to look at themselves with humility, then there is still a heartbeat.

As a marriage therapist working to help couples reconnect and increase understanding, I offer this advice: If you're feeling unhappy in your relationship, don't wait to get professional help from a trained marriage therapist. Don't wait for your partner to say he or she is done with the marriage before saying "OK, let's go to therapy." Be prepared to look at yourself and understand why you get triggered and the

impact your actions and reactions have on your partner. Imagine this interchange: Jacob walks into the house talking on his cell phone, and his wife, Rachel, starts fuming, telling him to get off the phone. Jacob only hears that she's complaining, and he feels controlled. He hangs up and makes a snide, angry remark to Rachel. Rachel returns with some sharp comments of her own. Obviously no one is going to feel good after this interchange. But what each one missed is this: Rachel had perfectly timed Yaakov's dinner to be ready for him when he got home. She couldn't wait to share what happened to her during the day. She was hungry for adult company after being with the children all day. His walking in while talking on his cell made her feel rejected and unimportant, but those weren't the feelings she was in touch with. What she was aware of and what got communicated were her angry feelings, leading Jacob to miss entirely the softer, more vulnerable feelings of hurt and longing, and then he reacted to feeling controlled. Jacob was aware only of thinking his wife is a controlling person. Had Rachel been able to say "Can you please give me your attention now? It feels like I've been waiting so long, and I really want to be with you," Jacob might have felt wanted and responded from a warmer, more loving place. This couple used their therapy to understand and communicate with each other differently, thereby beginning a positive cycle of engagement.

Accept that your partner will most definitely see things differently than you do, and understand that this doesn't make him or her "unstable" or "too needy". Check in with your partner and inquire how he or she is feeling in the relationship. That would be like taking a pulse. Listen for the hurt behind the anger, both as the receiver and as the communicator. Nurture your marriage relationship at its heart, making sure to hear a steady beat.

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