

WEISE WORDS

WORDS OF WISDOM FOR HEALTHY LIVING

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY:

Emotional Abandonment—When Your Spouse Shuts You Out

It's a complaint I hear regularly from people looking for help for their marriages:

"I feel distant from my spouse."

"I try to get my husband to open up, but instead he just shuts down."

"My wife just doesn't seem interested in me anymore. I feel like we're a million miles apart."

"I don't know if I love him anymore."

What we're talking about here is emotional abandonment. Instead of physically leaving the relationship, your spouse simply checks out emotionally. They stop investing in the marriage, leaving their mate feeling detached and unwanted. To the outside world the situation can still look rosy, but in reality the relationship is dying a slow, quiet death.

How does a marriage reach this point? Sometimes it's a slow slide into complacency, and other times it's a little more sudden. Realize that if it's a sudden abandonment, there likely is some precipitating event or incident between the two of you that needs to be resolved. On the other hand, if the deterioration has been more gradual, there are probably a lot of little things that have gone unresolved and are taking their toll on the relationship.

Here are some of the specific, primary causes of emotional distance between mates:

- **Unforgiveness:** Emotional abandonment is unforgiveness taken to its extreme conclusion. When we feel that our spouse has hurt us and we refuse to forgive them, we look for ways to protect ourselves from being hurt again in the future. Closing off our heart from the other person is an easy way to do this, but it has deadly consequences. Unforgiveness always leads to isolation. Overcoming unforgiveness requires a willingness to humble ourselves and seek forgiveness when we have hurt our spouse, and it also requires that we be willing to graciously extend forgiveness when our spouse has hurt us. This forgiveness step is based on a desire to re-unite.
- **Callous treatment:** When I am careless in how I treat my spouse, it gets old really quickly. Whether it's discourteousness, unkindness, or something worse, it creates hurt that may start out small, but can grow into deep wounds as it festers over time. To avoid this, each partner needs to look at their own behavior regularly and consider whether they are treating their spouse well. A mate, above all people, needs to be treated with gentleness and respect. Remember, your spouse is God's gift to you, and they deserve to be treated as something precious.

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- **Lack of effort:** Sometimes the problem is a little less obvious than unforgiveness or harsh treatment. It is easy, especially for men, to just assume that the relationship is going along just fine, and so we don't put in as much effort as we once did. We start to take our spouse for granted, leading them to think that they are not important in our lives. When the marriage slips from being one of the top priorities in the heart of one or both spouses, the other person feels abandoned. This causes them to feel unwanted and then to withdraw into their own world.
- **Lack of time:** Many of us simply try to pack too much into a day. Ruled by the urgent, we fail to make time for the truly important: things like romancing, talking about issues and really developing a friendship with our spouse. We stay constantly busy, erasing quality "couple times" from our schedules. A marriage relationship cannot thrive if our contact with one another is limited to a quick bite of supper or a brief chat before bed. A good marriage requires weekly face-to-face time - both talk and fun.
- **Fear of talking through issues:** Emotional detachment does not just happen out of the blue; there is always something behind it. If one or both of the spouses has an inability or fear of talking through the issues in their relationship, then this kind of disconnect will be the likely result. Usually both know there is something wrong, but they are hesitant to bring it up because they fear their spouse's reaction. Or perhaps they feel like they've been through this before and it hasn't helped, so why bother? In these cases, there needs to be a clear second look at what it means to resolve conflict in a marriage - how to have a "good fight," as it were, that really bring things to resolution. Without these skills, and a real courage to step up and deal with problems, the emotional distance will just continue to grow.
- **Living in denial:** A lot of times, when things have started to go a bit sideways in the relationship, we don't want to admit that it's happening. Often the person truly needing to make some significant changes is most content to deny the existence of any real issues. We kind of live in denial, as if it's not really happening, or it's not that bad, or things will get better in time. But living in denial doesn't fix things; it only causes the marriage to deteriorate to the point where the couple just does not feel close anymore.

Excerpt Currie, Dr. David with Hoos, Glen (2003). *Emotional Abandonment: When Your Spouse Shuts You Out*, Family Life Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.familylife.com/articles/topics/marriage/challenges/driftng-apart/emotional-abandonment-when-your-spouse-shuts-you-out#.VBIJf8LlaHX>

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