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When It's Just Another Fight, and When It's Over

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN



One evening shortly after their seventh anniversary, Louis and Shelley Silberman had an argument while preparing dinner. Neither recalls what that fight was about. But both remember how, in the middle of it, Ms. Silberman suddenly screamed at her husband: "We are done being married! I want you to move out!"



Elizabeth Bernstein on Lunch Break looks at how to know when your marriage or romantic relationship is over and what are the signs a relationship is no longer worth fighting for?

Mr. Silberman was floored. The couple had two sons, ages 1 and 3. They had met at a Club Med on the Caribbean island of Martinique when they were in their early 20s and had moved in together almost immediately. They'd bonded over tennis and travel. Mr. Silberman had fallen for her vibrant, fun-loving personality. Ms. Silberman liked how friendly and active he was.

"I thought it was just another fight," says Mr. Silberman, who lives in Scottsdale, Ariz., and owns a company that trains medical professionals and aestheticians to perform anti-aging laser procedures.

After his wife blurted out that she wanted a divorce, Mr. Silberman pleaded with her to talk about what was wrong. She refused. They both cried. She stormed off to bed.

"It's hard to say 'bye' nicely, there's so much built-up anger," says Ms. Silberman, of Cave



Brandon Sullivan for the Wall Street Journal

Shelley Cook, left, and Louis Silberman, divorced after seven years of marriage, but became friends and now work together.

Live Chat

[Elizabeth Bernstein discussed with readers ways of recognizing the end and breaking up as painlessly as possible. **Replay the event.**](#)

Dr. Doherty launched last year. He came up with the idea for the project after a local family court judge told him that a striking number of couples in his divorce court handled the process so well that he wondered why they were splitting up.

In a study of divorcing couples published last year in the Family Court Review, the results showed that about 30% of individuals who were divorcing said they would seriously consider a reconciliation service if it was offered by the court. Additional research that matched spouses' responses found that in about 10% of couples both partners were open to reconciliation.

Dr. Doherty estimates that in 30% of couples who seek marriage counseling, one person is what counselors call "leaning out," or wanting to go, while the other is "leaning in," or wanting to stay.

In discernment counseling, Dr. Doherty helps the leaning-out spouse decide if the decision to leave the marriage is the correct one. And he helps the leaning-in spouse

Creek, Ariz., now 44 years old, who has since remarried and is now Shelley Cook.

Couples typically wait an average of six years in an unhappy marriage before seeking help, according to the Seattle-based Gottman Institute. Deciding whether to leave a committed relationship can be a sad and complex process.

A new type of therapy, called "discernment counseling," breaks with traditional couples counseling, which seeks to solve relationship problems. Instead, discernment counseling, pioneered by Bill Doherty, a professor in the family social science department at the University of Minnesota, aims to help struggling couples decide whether to divorce or remain married. The new therapy is part of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project, which

cope in a way that doesn't make the situation worse—without pleading, threatening or otherwise turning off the already irritated spouse.

Over five sessions, Dr. Doherty has the couple examine what was good about the marriage, what got them to this point and what they did to try and save the marriage. He lays out three alternatives: marriage as it has been, divorce, or a six-month reconciliation with marriage therapy. Of the 25 couples Dr. Doherty counseled, 40% decided to try the reconciliation; the rest divorced or are still thinking it over.

There are plenty of reasons why people stay in a miserable marriage. They hope things will get better or stay for the kids. They are scared of what comes next. They think there will be a specific moment when they will know that they should leave. (Therapists say there isn't.)

Very often, a spouse doesn't speak up for fear of hurting the other person. Men are particularly bad about this, psychologists say. They typically have a tougher time expressing emotions and don't like to feel they are letting their wives down. They may immerse themselves in work or other activity and become distant.

People "feel that if they distract themselves, the problem will take care of itself, the marriage will just dissolve," says Susan Pease Gadoua, a clinical, licensed social worker, author of "Contemplating Divorce" and director of Changing Marriage in San Rafael, Calif., which helps couples whose relationships are in strife.

Many people looking to get out of a marriage behave badly. They check out emotionally. Have affairs. Wake up one day and just walk out. These behaviors hurt their spouses even more. "The greatest source of pain for a person who is the leavee is that they didn't have an opportunity to respond and work on things with their spouse," Ms. Gadoua says.

Ms. Cook had been thinking of leaving her marriage for several months. She preferred to stay home with the children, but he wanted her to work. She resented the long hours he spent on his new business. Therapists say marriages break up over time due to many factors, but Ms. Cook remembers the moment she knew her marriage was over: While she was hospitalized during her second pregnancy, her husband came to visit—and talked on and on about his business. "I thought, 'Is this

how it's going to be for the rest of my life?' " Ms. Cook says.



Jason Millet

The Silbermans began fighting more, often over little things. Mr. Silberman tried to get his wife to talk about what was wrong. She refused, turning on the TV or going to another room. After Ms. Cook demanded her husband move out, he pushed her to reconsider, to think of the children. He promised to change. Then he moved to a hotel, hoping the separation would be short-lived.

At his request, the couple went to counseling, but lasted only a few sessions. "It became very apparent that she wasn't budging," says Mr. Silberman, now 47. "I was checked out for so long that I was exhausted," Ms. Cook says. Nine months later, the couple divorced. She began seeing someone else. He became depressed, recovered, began dating.

Several years later, Ms. Cook was diagnosed with breast cancer and went through chemotherapy and radiation. After she finished, Mr. Silberman offered her a job. "I figured if it helps her, it helps the kids," he says.

That was eight years ago. Ms. Cook still works for her ex-husband, now as a laser-procedure trainer. Two years ago, the couple self-published a divorce guide, "After the Happily Ever After." Although they still squabble a lot, both say they are friends. "Leaving before the fire burned down the whole house made a big difference," Ms. Cook says.

Time to End the Relationship?

And if so, how do you break the news in a way that does the least emotional damage? Marriage therapists offer advice:

- Peer into the future.** Talk to a lawyer and an accountant, research what an apartment would cost, ask a real-estate agent to estimate a sale price for your house, says Susan Pease Gadoua, a licensed social worker who specializes in

helping couples with relationship strife. 'You will either become energized or depressed,' she says, 'and that will be telling.'

- Tell your spouse early.** As soon as you start losing your commitment to the relationship, speak up, therapists say. 'Bring up divorce when you still don't want it,' says Bill Doherty, director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project.

- Do therapy on a trial basis.** If you think your marriage could be salvaged, find an objective professional and agree on a trial period, typically six months to a year.

- Expect the worst.** Anticipate that your spouse will be shocked and behave badly. Regardless, listen calmly—for more than one conversation—to give your spouse a chance to respond.

- Stick around.** If you're the one leaving, don't move out or cut off contact too quickly. Some therapists even suggest continuing to live together for two to six months, if that's what your spouse wants, to ease the transition, Ms. Gadoua says.

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