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health & sex

Is Your Marriage Toxic?

A bad marriage may strain your health, as well as your relationship. Find out how to start mending it.

By Joanna Broder
WebMD Feature

Reviewed by [Laura J. Martin, MD](#)

You may have heard that married people tend to have better physical and psychological health, compared to singles.

But here's the fine print: People in unhappy marriages don't seem to get those benefits. In fact, their rocky relationship may make them less healthy.

For instance, a 2005 study showed that staying in an unsatisfying [marriage](#) may raise stress and worsen health. A later study showed that people in close, negative relationships are more likely to get [heart disease](#).

That doesn't prove that a good marriage makes you healthy, or that a bad marriage makes you sick. But there's no question -- a bad marriage isn't good for you.

When Anastasia (last name withheld for privacy) married her first husband, she found him to be considerate of her feelings and supportive of her career as a budding recording artist. But things changed over time.

When she became [pregnant](#), he refused to cook her the pasta and potatoes she craved because, as she recalls him putting it, the two foods didn't go together. She also says he once let go of their infant daughter's stroller from atop a hill, thinking it was funny. (Their baby was unharmed.)

Anastasia found that trying to express her feelings to the man who had vowed to love and cherish her became a continual exercise in frustration. He was usually dismissive, telling her not to take things so seriously. "I think the repressed anger and ... just my point of view not being validated, accepted... I think it kind of ruined my health, really," she says.

Consider the Stress

"If you're in a bad marriage, don't underestimate the stress that you are carrying around," says Sharon Rivkin, MA, MFT, a marriage and family therapist in Santa Rosa, Calif.

She says that if your day-to-day relationship is full of stress, fighting, or the silent treatment, "you are compromising your health every day."

Some couples cannot make it, Rivkin says, like if one partner lacks empathy or is physically abusive to the other one. But she says there is hope for most couples, even if they have years of hurt and resentment.

Here are five of the most common bad marriage habits -- and how to work on them.

Keeping It All Inside

Every couple faces challenges, says Susan Heitler, PhD, a Denver [psychologist](#) who specializes in marriage and family therapy, but if you don't talk about your problems, marital tension and the distance between you will only grow.

Joy (last name withheld for privacy) recalls how she avoided conflict with her ex-husband, a recovering [alcoholic](#), in part to protect his sobriety. "You almost walk on eggshells around somebody," she says. "You want to make sure they're OK and not wanting to drink and you don't want to stress them out and you don't want to start fights." The strained communication ultimately led her to become depressed.

People who grew up in families that communicated well about problems "speak the language of cooperation naturally," Heitler

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says. But many people don't learn those skills as youngsters and need tools for talking about sensitive issues in a safe way.

Work on it: Improve your communication skills. Heitler, author of *The Power of Two: Secrets of a Strong & Loving Marriage*, suggests turning to books on communication, marriage education courses, or web sites for help. Marriage counselors are another good option, but Heitler says not all of them teach effective communication skills, so look for one who does.

Poor Listening

Everyone wants to be heard, but partners in troubled marriages often don't listen effectively to each other. "When we don't listen, we hear a word that triggers us and then we're off and running with our argument," Rivkin says.

When someone doesn't feel listened to, they don't share the most intimate parts of themselves, because they don't want to be vulnerable, Rivkin says. But when they feel heard, the conversation deepens.

Work on it: Agree with your partner to take turns listening to each other for 3-5 minutes without interrupting. "Right away, when you start to listen, you get a new view of your partner," Rivkin says.

Blaming Each Other

In unhappy marriages mired in unresolved arguments and pent-up resentments, people often blame their partner instead of taking responsibility for their own actions, Rivkin says.

But blaming never solves anything.

"You're just going to escalate the argument," Rivkin says. "It's really not that we're trying to be mean to our partners, but we're at our wit's end."

Work on it: Try to find the core issues that you're really fighting about, Rivkin suggests. For instance, are you not feeling heard, loved, or appreciated?

If you are having trouble figuring out the core issue, ask yourself what or who does this fight remind me of? "Once you understand what's causing it, then you can change your patterns, change your behaviors," Rivkin says.

Taking Each Other for Granted

One of the most common problems in marriage is taking your partner for granted and becoming less sensitive to that person's needs over time, Rivkin says.

Maybe your partner no longer says hello to you when she comes home from work. Perhaps he doesn't acknowledge that you cooked his favorite meal for dinner.

"We all need appreciation and affection," Rivkin says. Without that, a person starts to feel lonely, unappreciated, and neglected.

Work on it: Show your spouse some appreciation with a gift or a simple thank you. And invest time in the relationship, like planning a date night, Rivkin suggests.

You may feel too resentful and angry at your partner to show appreciation. If so, Rivkin's advice is to do it anyway. "Right away, that wall of resentment and anger goes down just a little bit," she says.

You can further build intimacy by remembering what you once liked about your partner and telling your partner, at a calm time, what bothers you about their behavior.

Giving Up Too Soon

Don't hesitate to get help with your relationship, especially if you've tried and failed to improve your marriage on your own.

Work on it: Give it time. Don't expect the walls of resentment to come down right away. Rivkin suggests allowing at least three months to see if working with a therapist or using the advice from a relationship book is helping your marriage.

Change may come slowly. But don't be afraid of taking baby steps. "One little change can be huge to begin to change a pattern," Rivkin says.

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SOURCES:

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 Susan Heitler, PhD, psychologist specializing in marriage and family therapy, Denver.
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