Navigating a Separation

There are times that the only option you have in a difficult marriage is to separate for a time. Separations need to be navigated carefully because the ultimate purpose is to reconcile and reunite not to teach you how to live separately. It takes prayer and wisdom to know when and how to do it.

Reasons to Separate

There are many healthy reasons to separate for a time from your spouse. Here are some of them:

- You have hit an impasse where you have tried everything else and you are stuck in toxic patterns that are destructive and unproductive.
- You are going to divorce because you can’t live together anymore but you really don’t want to.
- You both recognize that you need to work on yourselves before you can work on the marriage.
- There is child abuse occurring in the home by one of the parents or behavior that is damaging to the children and you recognize that you have to protect the children.
- There is physical violence, emotional and verbal abuse, dangerous behavior, or sexual promiscuity.
- There is an affair and your partner has refused to end the affair.
- There is financial irresponsibility that you need to protect yourself from.
- You need time to decide if you want to stay in the relationship and you can’t do it while living together.

Separation Guidelines

If you both agree to separate in an attempt to save your marriage then you also need to agree on a plan that keeps you working together. If you are asking for a separation because your spouse is doing things that you cannot live with then you need to communicate clearly to your spouse what you cannot live with and what needs to happen for you to resume living together. If it is safe and wise given your circumstances, continue to see your spouse to work on the marriage.
Here are some things to do to make the most of your separation:

- Have a time frame as a starting point for how long you will separate.
- Have a plan that includes times that you will meet for talking about the problems and for dating for fun.
- Have a list of things that need to happen/change for you to move back in together.
- Have a plan for individual and/or marital counseling.
- Have a clear plan for how you will handle the financials and child custody during the separation. If you can, do this without an attorney; if it is too complicated, try to get one attorney to work with both of you to draw up the agreement. When you each have your own attorney, it increases the hostility and resentments and pushes you further apart. You should only do that if it is your only option.
- Have a plan for whether or not you will have sexual relations and under what circumstances. You would not want to do this if it allows your spouse to avoid all responsibility and still have sex; if you feel abused or used; if you are putting yourself at risk of sexual diseases; or if your spouse is having an affair.

**How to Reunite after a Separation**

The goal of a separation is to reunite and resume living together after having made progress on the problems so you can have a different and healthier marriage. The goal with getting back together is to maintain and continue the progress you have made while apart. You will need to have detailed discussions about what has to change, the responsibility each of you have in the changes, an agreement on how to handle slips with old behavior, and some kind of support to keep you both accountable such as counseling or a mentoring couple.

Here are the components of a healthy reunion:

- Clear expectations on both of your parts for what needs to change and who has to make the changes.
- An agreement on how to communicate about issues that come up and how to resolve conflict including an agreement to get counseling in the future if you cannot resolve issues.
- An agreement that it is okay for each of you to point out that you see old behavior/patterns reoccurring.
- An understanding that things will not be perfect and that it will continue to take time to work on the relationship and change old behaviors and patterns.
An understanding that if certain old behaviors re-occur that you will have to either separate or divorce. This should be only for the big things that are unacceptable for you to live with.

When to Reunite

Unless you plan to stay separated indefinitely or to divorce, there will be a time to reunite. Staying separated for too long increases the chances that you won’t get back together. Here are some guidelines on when to reunite:

- You have both had the time to work on yourselves individually and you have made progress in recognizing your individual problems and needs.
- You have made progress in resolving the issues that caused you to separate; they do not necessarily have to be resolved completely.
- Your partner acknowledges, takes responsibility for, and is working on the issues that you needed addressed in order to continue in the relationship.
- You can see that the separation is beginning to cause you both to distance yourself from each other and is becoming counterproductive to your goal of staying in the marriage.
- You can see that the separation is causing a financial burden and isn’t really helping enough to make it worth it.

When Your Partner Won’t Reunite

Sometimes one partner asks for a separation or leaves the home and appears to enjoy living the single life without attempting to work on the relationship. In this case, you will have to set boundaries on how long you will wait before filing for a legal separation or divorce. You will also have to protect yourself from sexually transmitted diseases if you think your spouse is unfaithful. You will also have to consider getting a legal separation through the court that involves getting a written and binding financial and custodial agreement. Living separately usually protects you from the debt incurred by your spouse while separated but if it is a big problem or you need to protect your half of the assets should you end up divorcing, then you might want to get the advice of an attorney.

How long do you wait? As long as you can and as long as there is reasonable hope of re-uniting and your spouse isn’t being unfaithful or hasn’t completely abandoned the marriage.

Difficult Separations

Sometimes one spouse wants to separate and the other doesn’t. This may mean that your separation is hostile and uncooperative and you are not able to continue working on the marriage.
If your partner isn’t cooperative and you have had to separate because of inappropriate behavior on his/her part then you will have to focus on being firm in your boundaries and clear as to the expectations you have for getting back together. It also means that dating and having positive and productive conversations may not be possible until your partner agrees to change the things that are unacceptable to you. You may have to seek support and counseling alone.

You may also have to file a legal separation with the court that protects you financially and gives you a formal custody schedule if you have children. This may make your separation more contentious but there are times that it is absolutely necessary to protect your financial and child custodial interests.

If your spouse has left you and doesn’t want to work on the marriage during the separation, then you will have to take a serious look at your marriage to figure out what the problems are and what boundaries you need to have during the separation.