

Is Your Relationship In Trouble?

All marriages have problems: He gives you silent treatment instead of talking when he's upset; you pay more attention to the kids' school projects than to the details of his day; neither of you can agree on the fate of the characters on your favorite TV shows. This, you tell yourself, is just what happens after so many years together, right? Or ... not right? Because, sure, you're not fighting, and nobody's having an affair. But at the same time, what if dangerous issues are brewing? How can you are you supposed to know?

William Doherty, PhD, the Director of the University of Minnesota's Couples On the Brink project helps more than 60 troubled couples a year. In his 35 years of doing this kind of work, he's noticed a handful of almost imperceptible signs when two people are just beginning to splinter apart. He tells us what to look for — in your own thoughts and actions — that may signal an impending crisis.

You're Doing A Lot Of Cost-Benefit Analyses

Perhaps this is you. While walking home from work, you have a little conversation with yourself: "I make dinner every night, plus, I said sorry when he was upset about the organic toothpaste — even though I love organic toothpaste and it's not too expensive. In fact, now that I think about it, I'm usually the first to apologize ... and the first to stay home with the kids at night. I work so hard. And what am I getting in return? A hug before bed? A bouquet of flowers?"

What you're doing here is a cost-benefit analysis. Corporations do this all the time. A company that makes skinny jeans compares the energy, money, and time all of its departments put into producing them with the energy, money, and time it gets out of selling them, to figure out if it should keep manufacturing pants — in a style that horrifies short, round women all over the world — or just stop.

People also use this technique to make decisions. "At the beginning of the relationship," says Doherty, "this kind of accounting is natural and appropriate [for couples] deciding whether or not to commit." But if you've already joined your life with someone else, you may not realize that by engaging in this kind of emotional inventory, you're already seeing yourself as separate from your spouse. Your time, energy, and resources are not his. You're one business, and he's another, instead of the two of you being united for the profit of all.

You're Conducting An Imaginary Marriage

Just to clarify, an imaginary marriage is not an imaginary affair, complete with dreams of secret rendezvous in obscure motels. It's a more subtle and, at times, harder-to-recognize fantasy, says Doherty. What to look for? You sitting at your desk, watching Jeremy from production post yet another blissful photo of his wife and himself on Facebook — this time of their trip for her birthday. A thought comes to mind: "Jeremy is so much more considerate than my husband."

Pretty soon, you make the leap to thinking things like: “If I were married to Jeremy, I’d never spend another holiday at home watching parades on TV.” In your reveries, you tell yourself you’d go to Paris with him. You’d come home at night to him in the kitchen making veal cordon bleu. The two of you would never argue about the cost of non-generic toilet paper or give each other lectures on how many squares you’re allowed to use. Because, in this relationship, you don’t have to deal with all those pesky details that challenge real-life marriage and that probably also caused you to invent Jeremy, the ideal hubby, with whom no man, not even your good, adorable, non-cordon-bleu-making husband can compare. You’ve lost interest in your husband taking you to Paris or posting photos of you on Facebook. You’re not ready to leave him in reality, but in the vast and unchecked world of your mind, you’re looking for Mr. Anybody Else.

You’re Building A Second Home

In a lot of marriages, there comes a time when you realize, “Hey, my husband isn’t meeting all my emotional needs. And I just have to accept that and start taking care of myself.” This can be a healthy decision. Let’s say you love all things literary, and he doesn’t. So you join a book group, and maybe make some friends on Good Reads or Shelfari. Metaphorically speaking, you’ve built yourself a little room in your life and filled it with not just books but friends who love books. You have all kinds of wonderful conversations there.

Where things get dicey, says Doherty, is when you commit to more and more groups. As you get busier, you build a room for each different activity, then fill that room with new intimates — now, you’ve built a gardening room, a PTO room, and a weekly office lunch date. In fact, you have a whole house for your emotional life, and that doesn’t include a room for your spouse.

One way to tell the difference between nurturing your own interests and moving out of your marriage, says Doherty, is to examine how you talk about your activities. If you’re saying, “I’ve got to get my opera fix,” on the way to the opera guild, then you’re talking about your love of opera. But if you’re saying, “I’ve got to do what I want,” then you’re looking for something much larger and more perilous for your relationship.

You’re Keeping Coffee/Lunch/Dinner Dates Secret

After you’ve built the second home, there’s often a tendency to hide what happens there. Let’s say you and your friend — not your crush, not your secret love or your secret passion — from book club have coffee one afternoon. Over coffee, you two talk about the memoir *Wild*. You bring up your own mother’s death. She brings up her own experimentation with drugs. The two of you share some pretty heavy intimacies. When you come home, your spouse asks what you did today. “I worked,” you say. “And then I picked up the dry cleaning and called that guy about the car.”

The problem is not that you shared an intimacy with somebody else, says Doherty, “but that you edited the event out of the conversation.” In other words, you’re hiding a meaningful exchange from the person you supposedly most trust — and you didn’t give

that person the opportunity to have that meaningful exchange with you. Another way to think about it? You took an emotional risk with someone, but you didn't (or couldn't or wouldn't) take the lesser risk of telling your spouse about it.

In all these situations, says Doherty, whether you recognize it or not, you're beginning to start a new life — as yourself, the individual, and not yourself, the part of a couple. At times, you may be convinced you're just giving yourself some space or giving your spouse some time to himself. But all that space and time can quickly turn into emotional light years. Thankfully, all is not lost if couples will get back to the serious task of meeting each other's emotional needs.

Adapted from Leigh Newman