

# SIX QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE ENDING A RELATIONSHIP

By Anna Cegielka, MSW



## Six Questions to Ask Yourself Before Ending a Relationship

After you and your partner had another endless fight or yet another dose of stony silence, you may be asking yourself: *What's the point?* Instead of being a source of comfort and safety, your relationship has become your biggest stress and a heartache. Breaking up may suddenly feel like a healthy way out of a destructive situation. But before you head for the door or call the lawyer consider the following questions. It may take you a few minutes to answer them or it may take a few months. It all depends on how much you invested in this relationship and to what extent your lives have become intertwined.

### **1. How much of my unhappiness is caused by my partner?**

“Love is all you need” is a beautiful song and a romantic notion but a dangerous expectation to bring to a relationship. Couples who manage to sustain loving feelings over the long term possess relationship skills that nourish and strengthen their bond. These relationship skills allow them to avoid what marriage researcher John Gottman calls The Four Horsemen of The Apocalypse. They are: Criticism (*You never listen*), Defensiveness (*I only did it because of you*), Contempt (*I can't believe how stupid you are*) and Stonewalling (*silent withdrawal*). You may want to ask yourself if you may be inviting (perhaps inadvertently) some of those dark forces into your relationship.

And then there is the usual assortment of stressors: pressures at work, attending to the needs of the children or aging parents, health issues, stretched finances, body image issues, feelings of depression, disappointment or exhaustion from having too much on the “to do” list. How does your partner contribute to those feelings? How much of your unhappiness comes from different sources?

## **2. Do I recognize a pattern here?**

There is a saying that you can have five different marriages with the same person, but you can also have one marriage with five different people. The first scenario takes place when partners grow as individuals and transform their relationship as they move through the different seasons of their life together. The second, less happy scenario, involves repeating the same patterns with different partners. So if you have the sense that you have been around this painful track before; it may be wise to pause and take a closer look.

## **3. Is it a deal breaker or a bump in the road?**

You have always wanted children, but your partner doesn't. He wants to buy a sailboat and explore far away lands; you want a house and a garden. There is no middle road here if both of you feel strongly about your desired life plan. Then there are the Three A's : Adultery, Addiction and Abuse. These are the obvious relationship destroyers. But the seemingly endless list of complaints that partners often present as reasons for breaking up are often solvable problems or difficult life transitions, which can be handled in ways that strengthen the couple bond.

## **4. What will I gain and what will I lose?**

You love your job and the travel it involves. Your partner does shift work and is often on call. How will you manage childcare when you separate? Will you be able to afford to stay in your home? Your neighbourhood? Keep the kids in the same school? How do you feel about re-entering the dating scene? Do you have many single friends? What are their stories about going it solo?

You may want to make a list of spin-off effects of your break up. Then do a cost/benefit analysis of splitting up vs. investing in trying to re-build your relationship. This is not about accepting an unacceptable situation. It is about the possibility of creating something new with the same partner.

## **5. What's different about the times when things are peaceful and the two of us feel connected?**

Even most embattled couples have moments when they find themselves side by side rather than being on opposite sides of a barricade. Moments when the connection that seemed lost, is there again and suddenly you remember why you fell in love with this person in the first place.

When a relationship is failing, our tendency is to ignore and discount any positives as a way of self-protection against further pain and disappointment. This is understandable but also self-defeating. It is more productive to pause and reflect on what is different about the times when things are good between you. Who is doing what, when, how? It may be as simple as passing a comics section to your partner and sharing a laugh or as challenging as attending a family reunion in a distant province. Once you have discovered what gets you good results (or helps you avoid bad ones) do it again and watch what happens. Take an experimental approach and enjoy the sense of empowerment that comes from having choices in how to act and respond.

#### **6. What steps have I taken to solve the problem and how did these solutions work?**

Sometimes the solution becomes a problem or makes the problem worse. Like speaking louder when you feel that your partner is ignoring you and not hearing your concerns. Or telling a depressed spouse to cheer up. Unfortunately, when our approach does not give us the results we expect, human nature is to do more of the same rather than try something completely different. To counteract this tendency you may want to observe yourself as you go about addressing problems in your relationship. Once you identify what does not work, try doing something different. Don't overthink it and strive to find a perfect solution. As long as you introduce some new steps into the old dance, change will follow.

Read more: **“Divorce Busting: A Step-By-Step Approach to Making Your Marriage Loving Again”** by Michele Weiner- Davis

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