

*“Father Charles, I wish we had come to you about ten years ago. I think, at that time, the marriage might have had a chance to survive.... Too much has happened since then, and I don’t believe it’s possible to recover what we’ve lost.... I’m so sorry, I wish I could love him, but I just can’t.”*

- A Client

When I meet with conflicted couples, I try and advocate for the marriage. To put it another way, I try and help couples recover the love, intimacy and trust they’ve lost over the years. My other priority is to help both partners become unstuck from a painfully emotional, often destructive situation. In many instances, the therapeutic process will lead people toward one another. In some instances, therapy will help them make some healthy decisions that will lead them toward divorce.

Please, don’t misunderstand this last observation. With the exception of abusive relationships, I am always saddened when two spouses realize their marriage is dead, and they must move on – especially when children are involved. I am a priest. I perform marriages. I am also a family specialist who is intimately aware of the negative consequences that divorce can have on people. So, it is never easy when therapy guides one or both partners to the realization that the marriage is dead.

Often when therapy reaches this point of no return, at some juncture before termination, one or both partners will offer comments like those that introduced this article. Moreover, this observation is often embedded within a mixture of emotion. Some relief will sometimes be discernible, but most of the emotion can be

characterized as deep, profound regret and sadness.

**WHY DON’T PEOPLE ATTEND TO THEIR MARRIAGES?**  
I often ask myself, Why don’t people attend to their marriages better? Why do they take them for granted? Why don’t they make them more of a priority? While I can’t answer this question in this short article, what I can say is that marriages are not like babies that cry out when they need something. They are also not like businesses that constantly remind us that if we neglect them, they will fail.

Marriages are just there everyday, like the sun that comes up. However, many of us fail to enjoy them, and worse, we assume they will always be there. My work with hundreds of couples has taught me this is simply not true. For the stark truth is, if we do not care for them, they may die.

#### **UNFRIENDLY FORCES**

There are too many unfriendly forces out there that can undermine a good marriage these days. These negative forces generally do not have a one-time dramatic impact on our marriages. In most cases, the impact is very subtle. Researchers have discovered that little irritating things, over time, negatively impact marriages, and undermine marital satisfaction. As these little irritants remain unattended, they undermine a couple’s intimacy, trust and love, while creating distance and leading a couple toward marital meltdown. To compound couple’s challenges further, it does not help that we live in a divorce culture that condones and encourages conflicted couples to consider separation and divorce when lingering disagreement pervades a marriage.

Unfortunately, far too many couples seem to simply accept their unhappiness, attend to their children, their careers, their personal needs, extended family needs and their civic responsibilities. All the while, they are not always entirely unaware that there is something terribly wrong. Yes, they intuit there is a problem, but other priorities and issues capture their attention and time. They also comfort themselves with the understanding that “things will get better, and that this won’t last.”

The truth is, if marriages are left unattended things generally do not get better. Instead, over time, conflict grows and unresolved issues cause things to get worse. Very soon, slight dissatisfactions in a marriage increase, and a couple’s intimacy is compromised, trust wanes and their love fades.

#### **GETTING HELP**

Can you relate to what I have written? Are you and your partner caught on a similar slippery-slope that continues to create distance between you? If you are, then don’t wait until things degenerate further, because they usually will. Prayerfully broach the issue with yourself and God, and then with your partner, and try and do something about it.

Do not assume the distance is like a cold that will pass. It’s not. In most instances, it is more like a cancer that will metastasize, and slowly kill your relationship.

If you are unable to do anything on your own, and you find yourselves simply spinning wheels, then I would urge you to consult your priest. If he cannot help you, at minimum, he will likely be able to refer you to a marital therapist who may be able to help.

### WHEN YOU'RE SEEKING HELP

In your efforts to find a marital therapist, be very careful whom you choose. Some will not advocate for the marriage, and only make things worse. With your priest's help, choose someone who is religious and, or respectful of your religious perspective of marriage.

In addition, before making an appointment, it's not inappropriate to ask the following questions:

1. Do you have a religious background?
2. Do you work with religious people?
3. Can you be respectful of my religious worldview?

If there is any hesitation in his or her voice, or you feel some discomfort with his or her answers, thank them for their time and keep looking. Remember that God will help you find the right person.

### SUMMARY

In the end, let's review what I stated. First, do not take your marriage for granted. This is not God's will. Second, just as your children, family and career need attention, your marriage needs attention. Third, marriages come apart over time, so you need to be attentive to them daily. Fourth, if you discern that distance has crept into your relationship, do something about it before the gap becomes bigger. Fifth, prayerfully ask God to help you broach the subject with your partner, and then talk to your partner about your concerns. Sixth, if this doesn't work, consult your priest. Seventh, if your priest cannot help, ask for his help in finding a couple's specialist. Last, but certainly, not least, do not take your marriage for granted and assume your current problems will disappear, because that is how most marriages begin slip-sliding toward divorce.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### INTERFAITH WEB SITE

[www.Interfaith.goarch.org](http://www.Interfaith.goarch.org)

### OUTREACH & EVANGELISM WEB SITE

[www.Outreach.goarch.org](http://www.Outreach.goarch.org)

### PUBLICATIONS

#### *When You Intermarry*

By Charles Joanides PhD, LMFT

#### *Ministering to Intermarried Couples*

By Charles Joanides PhD, LMFT

#### *Attending to Your Marriage*

By Charles Joanides PhD, LMFT

### OUTREACH & EVANGELISM:

#### *Some Practical Steps*

Department of Outreach & Evangelism



# ATTENDING TO YOUR MARRIAGE'S NEEDS

Advice from an Orthodox Christian Therapist



Icon by the hand of Athanasios Clark

Rev. Fr. Charles Joanides, Ph.D., LMFT