

# Helping a Friend's Marriage

## WHAT TO SAY AND DO WHEN YOUR FRIEND'S MARRIAGE IS HURTING.

HELEN WAS CLEARING the kitchen after dinner when Lucy called. "Helen, can we please meet up? I really need to talk."

"Hi, Lucy. Yes, of course! I can see you tomorrow evening for an hour. Is anything the matter?"

There was a long pause. "Yes . . . It's Mike and me. We're going through a tough time, and I don't know what to do."

"Well, I'm not a marriage counselor. I don't know if I can help. But I can listen and pray." Helen felt the anxiety prickle through her body.

If only she'd known before they went into ministry that people would come and talk to her about their problems. If only she'd taken that course in pastoral counseling when Steve was in seminary. If only she knew where to start and how to be more helpful.

### **WHEN YOUR FRIEND NEEDS TO TALK**

It takes courage to admit that a marriage is hurting. If someone comes to you, it's probably because they know that you care, that you won't be judgmental, and that your marriage has inspired them in some way.



## *“We’re going through a tough time, and I don’t know what to do.”*


Yet listening to other people’s challenges can be overwhelming, especially if you think it’s your responsibility to “fix” their life or their marriage. But that’s not your job.

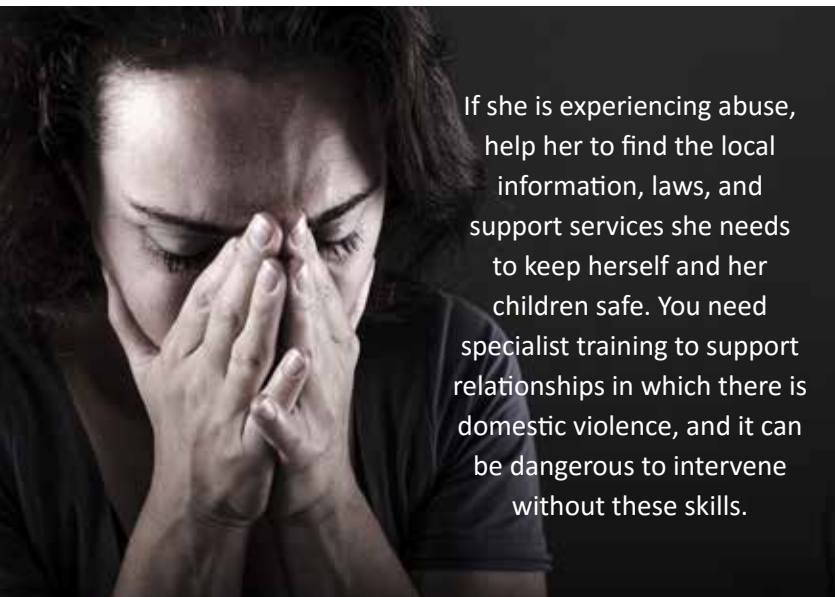
Here are a few ideas that may help you have those difficult conversations:

- Agree on the best time to talk, and limit the conversation to an hour so that you don’t get too tired and overwhelmed.
- Before you meet, pray that the Holy Spirit will open your friend’s eyes to the grains of hope in her marriage. Pray that the Holy Spirit will use your conversation to bless her, inspire her, and guide her.
- Keep the conversation confidential— unless she tells you that anyone, including herself, may be at risk. If she shares this information, you may have a responsibility to inform the relevant authorities in order to keep people safe. It’s important to talk with her about the best way to do this.
- Give full eye contact when you are listening, and reflect back what she tells you by summarizing what she has said. This shows that you have been listening carefully, and your summaries can help her to untangle her complicated thoughts.
- Comfort her sadness and hurts by saying such things as, “I am so sorry that you are experiencing this.”
- Start by asking about her *hopes* for the marriage. If you ask, “What are your problems?” you can both end up feeling discouraged and overwhelmed. Asking about her hopes will help to clarify her goals for the marriage.
- Ask what she would like to take away from your conversation together so you understand her goals for your discussion.
- Stay neutral, don’t take sides, don’t agree with her negative comments about her husband, and don’t blame him. This isn’t always easy to do, but if she goes home and tells her husband what you said about him, then you may do more harm to the relationship, and he will lose trust in you.
- Help her to identify the roadblocks preventing them from achieving their hopes for the marriage.
- Identify which roadblocks are long-term fixtures that may need to be accepted and which ones may need some creative solutions.
- Help her identify her healthy relational needs, as well as the needs of her spouse. These are things such as heartfelt appreciation, uncritical acceptance, quality attention, being valued, warm affection, comfort, encouragement, respect, feeling safe and secure, and being supported. Ask her which three she would most like and what her husband could do to meet these needs. Wonder about his needs too. Meeting each other’s needs helps to strengthen hurting relationships.
- Ask about a time when things have gone well, and look for strengths and possibilities in these moments: the “discussion” that didn’t end in a door-slaming argument, the time they were tender together, a moment when her husband put her needs first, etc. What did each of them do differently to help that moment be more loving?
- Ask her to notice the tiny things in the relationship that are working well and to list three positive signs in a notebook every evening, however small they are. This will help her to refocus on the healthy aspects of the relationship rather than on the difficulties.

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- Be curious about her husband. Ask: "What do you think your husband is experiencing at the moment? What are his challenges, hurts, and expectations? What do you think he would want to say and do if he heard our conversation today?"
- Avoid giving advice and instructions. Help her to make a list of possible solutions to her problems and to make her own choice about which ones might work best.
- Help her to turn her complaints against her husband into polite and loving requests for his help and affection: "Please, can you help me by \_\_\_\_\_?"
- Another useful question for your friend to consider: "When I do or say this, will it bring me closer to my husband or push us further apart?" If she wants a closer relationship with her partner, she needs to make choices that help to strengthen the relationship.
- Ask for her specific prayer requests, and pray with her.
- If she wants to talk longer than an hour, agree to meet again at another time.
- Offer to help with a possible solution that she has identified: babysitting, sponsoring their place on a marriage retreat, befriending them, mentoring them as a couple,\* etc.
- Suggest a book such as *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* by John Gottman, or *The Divorce Remedy* by Michele Weiner Davis.
- Take care of yourself. If the conversation has left you feeling drained or distressed, make sure that you can speak confidentially to someone about your experience, preferably a professional person who is skilled in counseling supervision or health psychology. Or invite someone to pray for you. You are important too.
- Keep working on your own marriage. This is one of the best things you can do as a ministry couple. It strengthens you and gives you lots of ideas and experiences that you can use to bless the many hurting people and marriages around you. 



If she is experiencing abuse, help her to find the local information, laws, and support services she needs to keep herself and her children safe. You need specialist training to support relationships in which there is domestic violence, and it can be dangerous to intervene without these skills.

- Help her to identify suitable marriage counselors. Marriage counselors are much cheaper than divorce lawyers.
- Some marriages can be transformed when one person does one loving, kind, and helpful thing every day for the other person, whether they feel like it or not and whether the other person notices or not. Encourage her to try this experiment for a month and see what happens.

\* If you would like to learn more about the ministry of mentoring marriages as a couple, read *Mentoring Marriages: Use Your Experience of the Ups and Downs of Married Life to Support Other Couples* by Harry Benson, 2005.

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