

FIVE PREDICTORS OF DIVORCE

M. K. Doc Downing Ph.D., LMFT

With divorce rates running at 50% or more, the thought of marriage can be scary. Some couples deal with this fear by choosing to live together to “see if we are compatible.” Others get married and just hope it works out.

If I could teach you how to predict whether your marriage will fail with 85-90% accuracy, would you be interested? Scott Stanley, Ph.D., from the University of Denver, has been doing a longitudinal study on marriage for over thirteen years. For this research project, he tested one hundred and thirty-five couples before they got married. Over the years, he has looked at the relationships of those who stayed married and those who had divorced. What he learned from his data was that the seeds of divorce were present in these relationships before these couples ever married.

Are the seeds of divorce in your relationship? Knowing these predictors of divorce will not eliminate all divorce, but it could reduce the rate of divorce.

In the five predictors of divorce, there is good news and bad news. The bad news is that knowing the first two predictors will not help you once you are married; it is too late to change them. The good news is that even after you get married, you can change or correct the next three predictors of divorce and improve your chance of having a long and successful relationship.

In the research, all five of the following negative behaviors, when exhibited before marriage, predicting a couples' future divorce at 85 to 90% accuracy!

The first predictor of divorce will come as no surprise to you. **Getting Married at 16 years-of-age** gives you better than 90% chance of getting a divorce. No surprise; so then the question becomes, what is the best age to get married that will give your relationship a chance of being successful? There is no correct answer. It depends on both of the individual's emotional maturity and communication skills. However, research seems to point to the age of 25 as an average age when most people have had a chance to grow and learn the skills needed to be successful in a relationship. Age itself is not the key here. There are many people who are thirty, forty, fifty and beyond who are still not equipped to handle a marriage relationship.

The second predictor of divorce, which you can do nothing about, is **Major Cultural and/or Religious Differences**. Race is not as important a factor as are the cultural differences. Years ago, I had an African-American friend from Connecticut. He married an African-American lady from the South who had come up North to go to school. Growing up, he had never really experienced discrimination and could not understand some of the attitudes and prejudices of his wife. What they enjoyed doing for fun was

very different; even the foods that they liked were different. For many years, their marriage was a constant struggle.

Another example could be a fundamentalist Jew marrying a West Bank Arab; now there is a sure ticket for another “War of the Roses.” But differences do not have to be this pronounced. People living next door to each other and going to the same church may have equally pronounced differences in their families. One person might have a major fear of abandonment, and the other person might have major control issues and a love of skydiving. Even something as little as one person loving scuba diving and the ocean, and the other person hating the ocean, but loving the desert, can create problems.

With these two predictors, once you get married, you are stuck. If you marry at sixteen, you can not go back and not be married. If your values, cultural, religious and personal interests differ significantly, then you might question how important this person is to your eternal happiness, because people are very reluctant to give up much in these areas.

However, these next three, you can change either before you get married or after.

Negative Fighting Styles. Constructive fighting is a healthy activity in a successful relationship. Unfortunately, most people are not familiar with fighting which ends in the issues being resolved and the couple feeling loved and validated. The alternatives are the Negative Fighting Styles. Here are three examples of negative fighting that can lead to divorce.

If you have one or a combination of these three negative ways of fighting, you have an 85-90% chance of getting a divorce.

- 1) This first one is where one person gets very angry and the other person shuts down or leaves either physically or emotionally. The more one shuts down, the more the other person gets angry and escalates the fighting. The reason this method results in divorce is that nothing is getting solved.
- 2) In this example, neither person gets angry. “In this family, we don’t raise our voices. We talk about our anger in a civilized way.” The problem here is that important things carry a lot of emotion, and what happens is that the anger is repressed and it turns into indifference or depression. Again, with this method, nothing is getting solved.
- 3) This is where both people are screaming at the same time; nobody is listening and nothing is getting solved. Often, what happens in this case is that one or the other will give up and leave only one person screaming. Now you are back to number one.

Researchers were able to identify all three of these negative-fighting styles before a couple got married. After marriage, the negative fighting continued until the divorce and in some cases, beyond. Changing the way they were fighting, for many of these couples, meant having to admit that what they were doing with their mate was not getting them what they wanted in the long run. And if they kept doing what they had always done

they would keep getting what they always got. Now, it is time to learn new ways of fighting where neither person felt like they are losing.

The fourth predictor of divorce was found in couples who used ***Putdowns and Discounts***. Early in dating, the researchers noted that in some couples there was a tendency for one or both to use negative humor. “For a fat girl you don’t sweat much.” Followed quickly by, “I was just kidding.” Or, “My wife thinks I’m a god. She is always giving me burnt offerings.” Or, “Next week he learns to walk without falling.” Or, there is the tee-shirt, “I’m with stupid.”

These couples often had cutesy names for each other, “My Little Butterball,” or “He is my little Buddha.” This type of high school ranking started out with laughing, but over the years, the humor seemed to be less and less and the anger behind the humor became harsher and more cutting, until it was the B word and the F word.

Doctor Stanley suggested that you don’t have to learn anything new in order to stop this type of negative behavior. “If I walk into a room where you are pounding your head into the wall, what new psychological principal do I need to teach you so that you will quit? Nothing, just stop doing it.” (Scott Stanley Ph.D., University of Denver)

*The fifth predictor of divorce is **Looking for Evidence** that you are not OK. Then, when you go into a relationship, it is only a matter of time before you will be alone again.* People with abandonment fears often fall into “looking for evidence” that their mate is going to discover the truth about them (that they are not OK and will leave). When you look for evidence that someone doesn’t love you, you will find it. “When we were at the dance, I saw you looking at that girl. See, you don’t want to be with me. I know you would rather be with her.” When you are looking for evidence that your partner doesn’t love you, this often looks like jealousy and can result in controlling and smothering behaviors. “I called and the line was busy. Who were you talking to?” “We don’t need any friends. We have each other.” “You don’t need to go back to college. You have the kids to take care of.” People with a low self-image are often amazed that someone could love them and are constantly expecting the inevitable, emotional or physical abandonment.

There are some things you can do to improve the odds that your marriage will be successful. Different families have different fighting styles. Negative fighting styles are learned, and what is learned can be unlearned. Positive fighting does take new information and then a dedication to practicing the new skills until they become a part of you. The problem is that when your feelings of anger go up, your logic goes down and you tend to revert to your old negative fighting styles. When this happens, it is time to call for a “re-fight”, where you look at “How could I have done it differently?” Nothing is a failure if you learn from it. This is not about starting the fight all over and doing it the same way. It has been said that, “Crazy is doing the same thing over, and over and over again and somehow expecting it to come out different.”

Along with doing the fight differently, never apologize unless you can tell the other person how you will do it differently next time. It is never OK to say, "I'm sorry," unless you include the remedy. Explaining how you are going to do the fight differently next time is important for two reasons:

- 1) It forces you to think of new ways of expressing yourself so that you are very clear about how you are going to respond the next time, and
- 2) It lets the other person know that you are serious about changing and your "I'm sorry" is not just more empty words.

Suggestions for Constructive Fighting

One of the biggest mistakes in fighting is where both people are talking at the same time and nobody is listening. To change this, you need to agree on Three Communication Rules:

- ✓ To listen to you does not mean that I agree.
- ✓ Differences do not make wrong, they make interesting.
- ✓ Acceptance does not mean approval. It simply means that I accept that what you are saying is true for you. I may or may not agree; I may or may not approve.

One way to learn a better way to fight is to hold a pen. Whoever holds the pen talks, the other person listens. When the pen is laid down, it becomes the other person's turn to talk. If it gets too emotional, you can call a time out. All time outs have to have time ins, otherwise you just forfeited the game and you both lose.

Listening without becoming defensive conveys the message that you are important and that I love and respect your feelings; this is an excellent way of raising a person's self-image. In fact, for most people, it is more important to be listened to than to get their way.

It is the fool who ignores the signs of danger, but if you will pay attention to warning signs, and make the changes, you do not have to become stuck in a relationship that is self-destructing.

<http://www.DocDowning.info>
DocDowning@att.net