

Marriage on the Mend Clint and Penny Bragg

We are living proof that, against all odds, a marriage can be mended. Originally married in 1989, we sailed through our first year together without incident. But, by the second year, irritations and differences that were once fairly benign created a steady stream of conflict. Our hopes for a permanent solution—or at least a quick-fix—remained dashed. Before long, we couldn't agree on anything, including the source of our discontent. Something was definitely broken, and try as we might, we just couldn't fix it. To complicate matters, we were too proud to tell anyone that our relationship was on the rocks. As a result, the breach between us only widened.

Tension mounted until one balmy evening just prior to our second anniversary, I (Penny) packed a few things in a suitcase and rolled it out the door. The last time we saw each other was the day our divorce papers were notarized, citing: "Irreconcilable differences have caused the permanent breakdown of our marriage."

Eleven years passed. During that time we had absolutely no contact with each other. Unbeknownst to either of us, our lives paralleled during the years we were apart. Not only had neither of us remarried, but we had both attended the same university and entered into teaching careers. More importantly we both received counseling to help us heal from the hurts in our pasts, started attending church, and discovered our need for God.

It was one letter of apology between us that started the ball of reconciliation rolling. On August 17, 2002, we were remarried—this time for life.

Tangible Tools for Mending Your Marriage

"I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?" For over a decade, we had underestimated the power of those words. Pride and stubbornness kept us from owning up to our part of the breakdown. As a result, we lost eleven years. Having been given a second chance is not something we take lightly. What we share here are some of the most important lessons we've learned along the way. All of these tools and more are included in our newly released from Kregel, *Marriage on the Mend—Healing Your Relationship After Crisis, Separation, or Divorce*.

Be Humble – Humility is often a necessary prerequisite for extending and receiving forgiveness. Acknowledge your part of the breakdown and apologize. It's never easy to admit mistakes or secrets, but honesty stimulates mercy. Dancing around the subject may save face, but it will also hinder true healing.

Be Careful – When there's a conflict, avoid making assumptions or judgments about your spouse's motives, attitudes, or behaviors. Your spouse is precious and should be treated as such. Handle his/her feelings and fears with respect, even if you may not agree with them or understand them.

Be Mindful – Maintaining a healthy marriage requires a conscious choice to cultivate loyalty, especially amidst turbulent waters. When a relationship isn't satisfying, it's tempting to seek pleasure elsewhere. No matter how you might feel, spending money, drinking excessively, indulging in pornography, or confiding in a person of the opposite sex will not bring you lasting satisfaction. Make a conscious decision to remain faithful to your spouse. Cope with difficulties

in healthy ways such as seeking professional help, getting an accountability/prayer partner, and/or confessing your struggles to a pastor or ministry leader.

Be Practical – Make the most of every opportunity to practice, pursue, and seek forgiveness. When you're tempted to lash out at your spouse, spend some time writing down and processing your feelings, fears, and thoughts in a journal first. Instead of pointing the finger at your spouse, what are the changes you need to make?

Be Grateful – Go out of your way to express gratitude to your spouse. Instead of focusing on your frustrations, engage in a labor of love for him/her. Find simple ways to affirm your appreciation for him/her.

Be Approachable – Let down your defenses. Encourage your spouse to come to you when he/she encounters a problem, but don't force him/her to talk. Value the pain and emotion he/she is experiencing by listening and asking clarifying questions. Listen more. Talk less. Welcome the expression of your spouse's feelings, as difficult as it may be to hear those things. Be aware of your body language. Suspend judgment. Extend love.

Be Resourceful – Know when and where to get help when needed. Read a marriage book together. Utilize the wisdom and counsel of others, especially those who have been through a crisis. Seek advice and mentoring from a couple who has been through the fire and come out of it stronger. Ask a professional for assistance when needed.

Be Respectful – Respect the process of reconciliation. It takes a while to turn a relationship around. Be patient, flexible, open to change, and willing to try new things, even if they seem outside your comfort zone.

Be Hopeful – No matter how much murky water has passed under the bridge, there is no brokenness that lies beyond healing. There is always hope, no matter how bleak things may feel.

Marriage is messy. Reconciling a relationship after crisis, separation, and divorce is even messier. You will face problems—old and new ones—along the way. But, you are not alone. We've had our share of troubles too, just like every other couple we've now served through our work as marriage missionaries. People often tell us that the problems contributing to the fragmentation of their marriages are far too ugly for repairs to be made. But if our marriage can make it, yours can too. If you want to get well and you want your marriage to get well, then you're already on the road to wholeness and healing.

(Excerpts of this article were taken from *Marriage on the Mend—Healing Your Relationship After Crisis, Separation, or Divorce*, Clint and Penny Bragg, Kregel Publishing, 2015.)

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