

# Danger signs signal marital discord

He wants a divorce because he's bored. She doesn't love her husband anymore. He's having an extramarital affair and hates himself for it. These are the kinds of marital disasters that are descending upon our friends and families like a modern plague.

When you see it happen, it's natural to ask: "How did they let it get so bad? Why didn't they do something about it before it got out of hand?" Usually, these couples didn't see it coming until it was too late.

Sure, they probably recognized that there were imperfections; but nothing that couldn't be tolerated, forgiven, or ignored.

Instead of bringing little flaws to the surface where they could be worked on, they learned to act as though everything was fine. They relied on the promised permanence of their marital vows to keep them together no matter what.

Only from the painful perspective of an ended marriage can they look back at the seeds of their disaster with wisdom. And that's when more than a few of these too-late couples have wished that they could step back into their own pasts and shake their younger selves into awareness.

AS A MARRIAGE counselor who feels some of that same frustration, I wish, too, that couples could become more sensitive to the subtle beginnings of terminal marital illnesses.

A common early danger sign is the "peace-at-any-price" syndrome, when the couple proudly brags that they never fight. Believing in an extremely popular misconception, the non-fighters are sure that this is a sign of marital strength.

By

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Ph.D.



Confusing comfort with happiness, these couples have sacrificed honesty, intimacy, and reality for the sake of avoiding hassles. Using rules, politeness, and phoney niceness, they have built an artificial harmony. Their boredom and frustration are kept inside where they can't hurt anybody. They treat each other as fragile, as unable to take the truth. They become experts at not rocking the boat—even while it is slowly sinking.

No one is more surprised than they are that such a quiet, peaceful relationship could end in disaster.

CLOSE COUSIN to the hassle-avoiders is the tolerator. His motto is: Marriage means compromise. He may be completely aware of the imperfections of his marriage, but he has learned to live with them.

He is the master of rationalization. He placates his frustrations with such phrases as: "Well, men and women are incompatible anyway; and 'Love is an unreachable ideal.'"

He believes that with a degree of tolerance he can learn to live with a boring sex life, the lack of companionship,

not really liking his wife. He learns to be more self-sufficient, finding substitutes for the close friendship he misses at home. He hardly notices the ever-increasing emotional distance in his marriage. He rarely recognizes that he and his wife have been divorced long before they made it formal and legal.

THEN THERE'S the tough approach to marriage. Like the tolerator, the tough spouse is aware of marital faults—but they just don't hurt anyone. Her husband may not give her the affection she needs, but that's just the way he is. You can't get blood from a stone, she believes, so don't let it bother you. He loves his job more than me, she says, but that's just the way men are, and I won't let myself be hurt by it.

What's the harm in not hurting? None, if you don't mind losing your love for each other and probably your marriage, too. Those same callouses that protect you from being vulnerable to marital hurt and frustration will dull any romance. That pile of unresolved "little" hurts will bury even the strongest and most hopeful young love.

Finally, there is that well-known culprit—rigid marital roles. He must be the provider, she must raise the kids. He must be strong and dominant, she

must follow his lead. To do otherwise is to breach the contract, to break the law.

As her husband, he owes her affection, whether he feels it or not. She has agreed to nurture his evening aches and meet his sexual needs, as her wily duties. Not a bad arrangement on paper. Like traffic laws, these roles prevent collisions at intersections. Everyone knows their place.

But these rigid rules don't fit the vast variability of human beings. They pinch the husband who wants to just be himself. They cage the wife who wants more than obligatory love. They stifle spontaneity and adventure. They promote deception and devious extramarital outlets. They beg for rebellion. They lead to disaster.

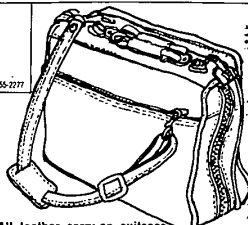
Avoiding marital disaster means being watchful. It means spotting and stopping these dangerous patterns before they get out of hand.

At the same time, it doesn't mean that you have to become a marital hypochondriac, looking for divorce behind every squabble. The point of this is to emphasize that in marriage the little things are big things. It's to show you that problems don't come out of the woodwork, they come from what you do and what you don't do. So do solutions.

Thursday, December 8, 1977

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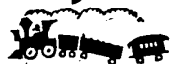
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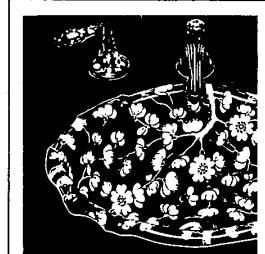
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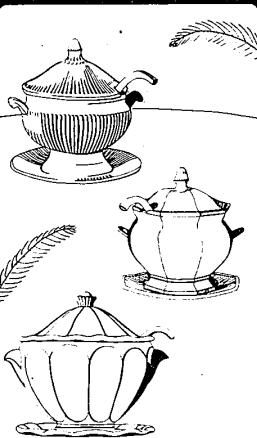


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