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Introduction

It is difficult to stay on the healing and rebuilding path when a marital crisis erupts.

And, with most, when the pain and tension begins to escalate it’s next to impossible NOT to say or do that which shoots you in the foot and makes the situation worse.

A marital crisis throws you into a painful world; a world of the unknown.

Sleeping, eating, thinking clearly are overwhelmed by the constant thoughts of him/her, your potential loss and questions of what you can do to heal the pain and restore the relationship.

One of your problems is a lack of solid information and understanding about a marital crisis.

You are taught very little about how marriages work. Or, perhaps, the models around you of a loving and lasting relationship leave much to be desired.

Did you know that you are most vulnerable to a marriage crisis at particular points in your marital development?

Critical times are: after the birth of the first child, when the oldest child enters early adolescence (especially for the parent of the same sex,) the empty nest, mid life (38-49) and retirement. Each marriage feels the stress and change of specific transitions.

Did you know that a marital crisis does not emerge from thin air? Usually the tension has resided in the relationship for a period of time and now is erupting. That is one reason why the time of a marital crisis THE best time for rebuilding your marriage.

Did you know that conventional marital advice (talk more, be more romantic/ sexy, learn communication skills, go to counseling, date, spend more time together, etc) often keeps you stuck and recycling your marital garbage? Conventional advice is often driven by Emotional Fusion, a marital systems term that describes a ”stuck” relationship.

In the last few years of my more than 25 years of clinical experience, I’ve identified 8 elements that break through marital fusion and allow love to spontaneously and powerfully emerge.

There is much to learn. And, learning and gaining knowledge alleviates your fears and empowers you to chart new courses that will radically give you the love you truly want.
I will share with you in this short report 5 tips that will help you move through the marital crisis.

These are general tips. I don’t have the time here to move to specifics. Just keep these tips in mind when you confront your marital dilemma.

Let’s get started.

**Tip #1: Get Underneath Your Pain**

A marriage crisis brings all your pain and hurt, seemingly buried for years, screaming at you.

You are in pain! You are in a ton of hurt.

The pain can be incredible, debilitating and persistent: It just won’t let you go!

Nothing in this universe can pile the pain into the depths of your soul quicker and more powerfully than believing that your hopes, your dreams, your love, your trust, your security - your life - might come to an end because your spouse is checking out and your marriage, family and future is crumbling and disintegrating before your very eyes.

The pain!!!!

What do you do with it?

Probably not want you think you want to do.

We can’t stand pain in our culture. We want it over with; done, gone.... NOW, not later!

And so, we pop a pill, gulp down a stiff drink, go shopping, try to laugh with our friends, eat until our eyes (or gut) pops out, crawl into our cave, get a reading or even jump into therapy. Anything – to get away from it.

We want relief – from the pain of embarrassment, betrayal, our thoughts of failure and inadequacy, being lied to, ignored and a sense that we are cast aside.

We want to get away from the pain. We believe we can’t stand it and try to bury it – under something!

And some of our tactics do seem to work:

A pill numbs us.
Food can comfort.

Booze helps us forget.

Buying and consuming give an illusion of having.

The gregarious voices of our friends drown our loneliness.

Isolating ourselves may create an alternative and less threatening world.

I’ve accumulated thousands of hours for direct counseling with couples and individuals over the years and it is indeed common, for those wanting therapy or counseling, to look for relief from their pain. Bottom line: that’s what they want. Do your magic and help me feel better!

And, often, after an individual or couple finds relief from their pain, usually through catharsis, they discontinue their sessions and are on their way.

They buried the pain. But the elephant still sits there.

Later I find them in my office again, recycling back to the same pain or hear from someone that the marriage or person, fell apart – again.

Now, I’m all for feeling better. I don’t like pain. I don’t like others to be in pain. And I want to help you not experience your anguish and emotional torture.

What is your pain?

Is it a sign of weakness? A defect? A loss of control? An outside force over which you have no control? A personal embarrassment? A sign of mental illness?

No!

Your pain is merely a part of you distressed and wanting something different.

Your pain is trying to tell you something. Your pain wants you to listen.

Your pain CAN be your best friend.

Body builders sometimes use the phrase “No pain, No gain.” There is a kernel of truth in that statement.
Your pain wants something different. Your pain is moving you into an arena of betterness.

One of my coaching clients discovered her husband was having an affair.

For most of the session she talked about him: what he was doing and not doing, what she wanted from him, how to stop him, how to win him back, wanting her marriage back, how much she loved him even though he was betraying her and how miserable her life was without him.

Her words were punctuated with sobs and an agitated quiet anger. She couldn’t sleep, couldn’t eat and could not get him out of her mind.

She oozed an aura of misery and pain.

And then I said: “It must truly hurt.”

And with a few words and more tears she implied, “Duh, what do you think?”

I then asked THE question: “Where does it hurt, Mary?”

She stopped. “What do you mean, where does it hurt?”

“Where in your body, Mary do you feel the pain?”

She didn’t know what to say. Silence.

I helped her a little: “In your head? Your back muscles? Your stomach? Your eyes? Your heart?”

“My heart,” She said.

And, when you feel the pain in your heart, what does it feel like in your heart?”

Silence.

Then, “like a sharp pain.”

I gave her the space to acknowledge that sharp pain. (BTW, that space is vital!)

Silence.

After a few seconds I added, “And Mary, if that sharp pain in your heart could speak, I wonder what it would say to you???”

Mary did not have an answer. (The answer would come later.)

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But, she was on her way to healing and resolution. It began.

She began to make the shift to acknowledge and even welcome the pain.

The outcome: She felt immensely better (and I suppose a little empowered) after our conversation.

There was hope, for Mary! There was a little sliver of peace, for Mary.

Her world, her feelings and even her perception of her cheating husband began to change.

Pain is merely a part of you wanting something different.

Your pain won’t kill you. Your pain will lead you.

**Tip #2: Make your world larger**

In the beginning sessions of coaching I often ask someone: “What you would truly like to say to your spouse? What would you say if s/he was standing before you right now? Uncensored. No holding back. Let it fly!”

Often I get the agitated response, “Well, I’ve said everything!”

I urge them to tell me exactly what they’ve said.

This is a very frequent response: “I’ve told him/her that I love him/her; that I want us to work on our marriage and make things better; they can be better if only we try. We have too much to lose and we don’t want to give up on the marriage.”

This person’s spouse responds in a predictable fashion: ignores the statements, argues with the statement, gets frustrated or angry, and perhaps walks away. The distancing spouse keeps giving the same response to the same plea – over and over again.

The pursuing spouse blinded by the hurt, desperation and locked into a painful personal need system, keeps reiterating the narrow slice of the perception of the situation.

Pain is his/her world; a very narrow world with seemingly few options and not much hope.
As coaching proceeds a larger world is revealed. And, this larger world gives more options, more peace, more hope, more strategies and more personal power. The personal neediness and fear slides into oblivion.

Please allow me to give show you how the pursuing spouse’s world becomes larger and leads toward resolution and healing.

1. The pursuing spouse could say, “I’m afraid. I’m terrified. I fear losing everything that is important to me.

The distancing spouse raises the eyebrows and doesn’t know what to say. Their world is a little larger.

2. The pursuing spouse could identify the channel of his/her personal neediness that feels the fear and desperation, stare at it with compassion and take care of that neediness so it lessens its power and grip.

The distancing spouse begins to worry. The pursuing spouse is no longer “playing the unspoken game” that maintains the emotional distance.

Their world is larger.

3. The pursuing spouse says: “You have a problem and it’s difficult for me to watch you throw your life into the gutter.

At an obvious or more hidden level, this rattles the distancing spouse.

The pursuing spouse confronts with reality rather than patronizes.

The world became a little larger.

4. The pursuing spouse could say: “I want resolution. I would like to get at the elephant in the room and move on – with or without you. The sooner, the better.

The distancing spouse ponders: “What does this mean? Where does that leave me?”

The world expands.

5. The pursuing spouse shifts and says, “I want to be married to an adult, where there is mutual respect and understanding.
The distancing spouse now knows the lines are drawn.

Again, a larger world view.

Now, realize, I could list a hundred different ways the pursuing spouse could craft sentences, shift the focal point, alter the tonal level of the voice, shift the perception of self, shift perception of the distancing spouse and could make various comments about the process of interaction.

There is NO limit to what you can say or how you respond.

In your pain and narrow world you just don’t grasp that reality.

And so you are limited. You suffer the same suffering every morning, afternoon and evening.

Your narrow world of pain, desperation and worn out perceptions of self, your spouse and your lack of information about intimate relationships suffocates, drains life, hope and passion.

We all experience this to a degree.

A Marital crisis takes you back to old ways of thinking and feeling that are negative, constrictive and fail to serve you well.

It’s like the proverbial horse who runs back to the stall even though it’s on fire because the horse is afraid the wants the familiar.

Here’s another strike against you: you are not taught adequately about the dynamics of marriage and relationships of emotional investment.

You know more about how your cell phone operates than you do your marriage.

You travel through the education process learning how things work, the underlying reasons and dynamics, and how to fix. However you receive very little similar information when it comes to marriage.

As well, counseling or therapy is viewed as “treatment” but not a place for you to widen your perceptual world about marriage.

A marriage crisis is letting you know that you want to embrace a larger world. You are weary and broken because you keep recycling that which doesn’t work.
The marriage crisis is telling you, you want more. You want to break out of your pain, isolation, and distortions.

You want to remove your relational and personal blinders.

You want to see more, feel more and know more. You want more of what a deep emotionally connected and mutually respectful marriage or relationship offers.

The joy and value in my life is to walk with those I coach in reaching out toward that joyful realization.

**Tip #3: Shift your focus**

When confronted with a marital crisis, your knee jerk reaction is to focus “out there” to stop the crisis.

An almost obsessive like focus on your spouse or partner during a marital crisis I find extremely common, at least when the crisis first erupts.

Your world is thrown into chaos. Your future suddenly is marked by uncertainty and fear.

You may want assurance from your spouse that this is not as bad as it seems. You need to hear from him/her that your world will indeed be ok.

You need to hear that you are still cared about, considered and yes, loved.

You wonder what s/he is thinking. Where did this come from? You need information. You need data. You want to know what in the world is going on. What moved him/her to this crazy like behavior? After all, YOUR life is on the line.

And so, your eyes, your words, your thoughts, day and night focus and wonder about him/her.

And you play the game internally and also with him/her; If only you would ________________ then I would __________________. And your spouse/partner replies; Well, If only you would ________________ then I would ________________.

You may explore what “out there” caused the problem. You begin to work diligently at “fixing the problem.”
Is it a sex problem?
Is it a money problem?
Is it a work problem?
Is it a children problem?
Is it a friend/family problem?
Is it a health problem?
Is it a time problem?

You search for any inkling of what problem “out there” needs to be fixed to short circuit the crisis.

You are taught to “fix” a problem that exists in your world, so you rack your brain attempting to create solutions to your problem.

You eventually will discover that attempts to “fix the problem” are met with resistance at best and sabotage at worst.

Your crisis is fueled not by a problem “out there” that needs to be fixed but an inner emptiness or chaos that cries for relief.

The next step of external focus is to seek help; to look in your world for something or someone who can “make” you – and your spouse or partner – better again.

And you think about:

- Get into marriage counseling
- Find a good couples’ therapist
- Attend a weekend marital retreat or conference
- Read a self help book on rebuilding a marriage
- Plan a romantic getaway
- Do a Google search for marriage help
- Talk to your pastor, priest or rabbi
- Start dating each other again
- Spend time talking about your feelings

Now, some of these approaches will be helpful. You will feel better. The stress and strain will most likely diminish.

Although these rebuilding strategies are commonly espoused, they are temporary fixes at best.
Most fail to address the underlying process of building a marriage or relationship of deep emotional investment. As well, they often fail to get at the core issues that are vital to a healthy long-term relationship.

Creating a lasting and mutually satisfying emotional connection that you can trust and know will endure the test of time only occurs once the marital process is embraced and core issues are addressed.

Summary: No one “out there,” no therapist, no retreat, nothing “out there” will give you what you ultimately want – peace, fulfillment and passion.

Once you shift your focal point from what outside you can “make you better” to “what am I experiencing now?” your healing and change accelerates.

You begin to ask: What triggers do I respond most intently to? Where is my pain? What is my pain trying to say to me? What do I truly want? What are MY standards? What do I value? What do I TRULY want to convey to my spouse or partner about ME? What is MY position in this marital crisis?

Please know that you are taught, it’s deeply embedded within you, that your crisis can be treated by something “out there.”

Treat yourself with leniency and respect as you shift your focal point from “out there,” to your experience.

**Tip #4: Respect yourself**

Nothing tears at your self esteem and sense of well being more than a marital crisis.

The question is often posed to me by someone in the midst of a painful relationship upheaval:
What did I do wrong?

You assume you failed. You ask yourself in the middle of the night, “what could I have done differently? If only I would have paid more attention, been less angry, been more positive, listened better, spent more time with” and the list of “If only I would haves” goes on and on.

You may feel terribly responsible and a part of you won’t let go of the idea that somehow, perhaps in glaring ways, you are to blame.
You kick yourself. You berate yourself. You want to turn the clock back. But, you can’t.

There’s another level to the erosion of self esteem and self respect as well; another pernicious level that rips a hole in your soul.

I hear a suffering spouse utter or imply, “What’s wrong with me, that this could happen?”

You may believe that the marital or relationship crisis points to the reality that you are in some way defective and inadequate.

That sense of being defective or inadequate is finally brought, at least from your point of view, into the open. You as a person are outed.

Your nagging sense of inadequacy you so valiantly tried to mask or overcome is now exposed.

It is exceedingly difficult to manage well and recover effectively from your marital crisis with low self esteem or shattered sense of self.

I want to help you regain yourself respect so you can get on with the job of healing and restoration.

Regaining yourself respect often occurs when you understand that you are neither totally responsible nor defective and inadequate but marriage or a relationship of significant emotional investment provides a rich environment for self esteem to get flushed down the toilet.

Consider:

1. Marriage exposes you.

There is a vulnerability in all of us; at least all “normal” functioning people.

In most relationships you control others’ access to that part of you. You can hide. You can pretend. You can avoid.

You may attempt to use that same strategy with your spouse, but events, words and strong feelings emerge that cut through your façade and touch on that which you try to hide.
Your humanity, idiosyncrasies and foibles are exposed. They may or may not be accepted by your spouse. They may be acceptable to a degree at particular times.

2. You are taught an unrealistic ideal

We also are bombarded from the media and other forms of communication, even well intentioned self help people, with an image of marriage or being married that flies in the face of reality.

I watch parts of the “Bachelorette” on television and cringe. Is this what it means to “fall in love” or “be in love?” Are most of us really that naïve, or do we get off on the silliness and superficiality of the show?

Or, is there a part of you that longs to be swept off your feet to some exotic place and live with that “love” for the rest of your married lives?

And so we believe that these beautiful people “have it.” And, we don’t.

We feel our emptiness, our frustration, our resentment, our loneliness and we think, “What’s wrong with me/us?”

3. We create roles

We also attempt to cope in married life by adapting and living different roles, thinking, “This is how I’m supposed to act in a marriage.” The husband plays the role of the provider. The woman is the nurturer.

The man plays the take charge role. The woman plays the submissive and helpless role.

One initiates sex. The other receives sex.

One is the strong silent type. The other is the gregarious seductive vixen.

One becomes the parent. The other becomes the child.

Roles may work for a period of time or may last the length of the marriage. However distance is perpetuated and you never truly encounter one another, only the roles.

The strain of the roles is shattered by a marital crisis.
4. Unfinished business

We take into our marriages the unfinished business of maturation. The patterns and thoughts about self, others, marriage, sex, intimacy, abandonment, etc. we carry along and place at the feet of our spouse, usually unconsciously.

The marital crisis is often an outbreak of unresolved and unfinished business from the past and has very little to do with you, the hurting spouse.

Understanding the powerful dynamics of a marital relationship or relationship of deep emotional commitment may help gain yourself respect, knowing that many forces are outside your control, responsibility or sense of adequacy.

Someone may say, "How do you not go crazy after you hear all the stories of heartbreak and pain from those enduring a marital or relational crisis?"

I’ve thought long and hard on this question. I’ve literally logged tens of thousands of hours or listening to pain and heartbreak of couples and individuals since 1983.

I am able to hear stories of pain and anguish of different varieties, over and over again, because I have absolute and unswerving faith in a person’s capacity to dig deep within and bring to light and power the solutions to their problems, the healing to their relationships and themselves.

I believe in your innate and given capacity to heal and guide yourself.

I’ve experienced this with thousands – moving beyond the despair, neediness and desperation – discovering their voice and power and creating a new life and new relationship. It truly is amazing.

Tip #5 Keep your focus

I’ve observed that we live in an ADD – OCD culture.

You may flit from thought to thought, project to project and for the life of you find it difficult to maintain your focus. Our medical community labels this as Attention Deficit Disorder and prescribes medication.

Or you may work extremely hard controlling your environment or the people in your world. You want to feel safe and mentally become exhausted plotting and arranging your world so it feels safe. Our medical community labels this an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and prescribes medication.
In the first case it seems impossible to focus on anything for a period of time. In the second case your focus is so narrow you miss what is important.

The intent of both ADD and OCD is to manage your tension.

When a marital crisis invades your life you find it extremely difficult to maintain your focus on the core issues in your marital crisis.

You struggle to “keep on track.” Your spouse also may wander. A meaningful connection feels illusive and difficult to maintain.

Here are a few specific circumstances that typically make it difficult to maintain the focus necessary to resolve effectively and permanently your marital dilemma:

1. You tend to back off your energy and commitment once the pain recedes. Pain is a motivator. Pain is a reminder. Pain suggests you keep focused on repairing and rebuilding.

And, if you are like most, you deplore pain.

I’ve observed over the years that counseling, whether individual or couple, has relief expectations. The medical community again describes counseling as “treatment.” And, the ultimate goal, at least in our culture, is relief from the discomfort.

Once relief or pain reduction is achieved, I’ve encountered untold couples and individuals call a halt to not only counseling but also the process of shifting and addressing any elephant left sitting in the room.

2. Others will distract you from the often complex but exciting rebuilding process. Your family and friends again, don’t want you to suffer (probably because it reminds them of THEIR suffering) and so offer simplistic and pop culture solutions.

And so you hear, “Get rid of him/her. I wouldn’t put up with that! Why do you put up with that? Just work harder. Meet his/her needs. You need counseling. Spend more time together. Hey, I just read this book on marriage....” Etc.

They fail to “get” your journey or the depth to which you desire healing and restoration.
And, if you change too much, become someone different, you may pose a threat to their sense of familiarity.

3. The lure of the familiar may be too much.

To embrace a world of powerful love, an intimacy that craves depth and understanding, a self that desires to be more vulnerable and give and receive more expectantly means you are moving into the unknown.

There are moments of doubt and concern for those who truly want to move into that world of intimacy.

The old self, the self that could predict the response of your partner, although not what you wanted, still relishes the familiar.

And so, you might back off your new path. You might one day slide back to the familiar world of lack and distance.

This may be especially true if your spouse or significant other finds the new path extremely difficult and resists.

Keeping your focus on the path of restoration and a deepening intimacy has its challenges.

Allow me to offer just a few suggestions on what you can do to better maintain your focus.

1. Find like-minded people that support and encourage you.

It may be difficult to find such a group locally.

This is where the power of the internet serves you.

Hundreds of those who read my first ebook, “Break Free From the Affair” not only found the materials extremely helpful, but used support groups and chat rooms I established online.

Many attest to the healing power of those groups and relationships. Some, who lived in proximity to each other, would gather locally to continue their support.

When I face a crisis I usually have 3-5 books on the topic open and reading. I devour new information.

Knowledge IS power.

A new world opens. (Do you suppose one of the purposes of a crisis is to do just that – open a new world?)

3. Journal and write, if it fits you.

Writing for some, is a powerful way to keep your mind and spirit focused.

The words often flow freely when I write. It’s as if words come from within me automatically and freely.

Those words express most fully at the moment what I need and must express to complete the next chapter of my journey.

4. Find a personal coach.

Many find it helpful to contract with me or Jeryl for coaching sessions as a way to keep focused and accelerate the change process.

Weekly sessions provide a framework of accountability. (What will I focus on this week? What do I really want to see happen and experience?)

Coaching sessions are also vital to maintain your self esteem and sense of well being.

It is extremely easy for feelings and thoughts of worth to slide down the toilet in a marital crisis.

A coaching presence lets you know that you truly are OK, have value and worth and do have much to offer.

5. Place a rubber band on your wrist and when your mind and heart wanders to the negativity, snap back to reality.

This trick is especially helpful when you identify a negative theme or way of thinking that triggers a long and hard slide to illusions and distortions about yourself or your spouse that become self-defeating and destructive.

6. Reframe your pain.

Think of your pain as your friend.
Think of your pain as a part of you that is merely suggesting you seek another way of thinking, feeling and acting that will bring deeper joy and more meaning in your life.

Just notice your pain. Acknowledge your pain.

And, this may sound a little weird, listen to your pain.

Your pain or that part of you will let you know what you really want.

It will keep you focused on moving into the next wonderful chapter of your life and relationship.

You need not allow circumstances or your internal struggle to knock you off focus.

Use the suggested tools to keep you on target, moving toward a life and relationship that keeps a smile on your face and warmth in your heart.

**Conclusion**

Your marital crisis is NOT the end of the world.

It could be the beginning of a new chapter that brings you much more than what you now think possible.

You are not defective. Your marriage is not defective.

A marriage crisis is an indication that you truly desire a deeper more profound level of intimacy and emotional connection. And, you want this connection to lead to freedom and the opportunity to express yourself in ways that will be honored and welcomed.

Your journey continues. Enjoy the ride and what it will bring. The best....

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Dr. Bob Huizenga is an author, researcher and coach specializing in relationships of emotional investment. He began his practice as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in 1981 working since then with thousands of individuals and couples wanting better relationships.

In 2002 he wrote one of the first and best selling ebooks on infidelity, “Break Free From the Affair.” In addition, Dr. Huizenga recently finished his new ebook, “Save
Your Marriage - 27 days to create a love you can trust,” a practical step by step guide emerging from his research and marital clinical experience over the past 30 years.