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How common is divorce and what are the reasons?

Marriage is a counter-cultural act in a throwaway society.

—Dr. William H. Doherty, noted marriage scholar and therapist ⁵⁵

Overview: In the United States, researchers estimate that 40%–50% of all first marriages, and 60% of second marriages, will end in divorce. There are some well known factors that put people at higher risk for divorce: marrying at a very early age, less education and income, living together before marriage, a premarital pregnancy, no religious affiliation, coming from a divorced family, and feelings of insecurity. The most common reasons people give for their divorce are lack of commitment, too much arguing, infidelity, marrying too young, unrealistic expectations, lack of equality in the relationship, lack of preparation for marriage, and abuse. Some of these problems can be fixed and divorce prevented. Commitment is having a long-term view of the marriage that helps us not get overwhelmed by the problems and challenges day to day. When there is high commitment in a relationship, we feel safer and are willing to give more for the relationship to succeed. Commitment is clearly a factor in why some couples stay together and others divorce. Divorce is necessary at times, and it may even help to preserve the moral boundaries of marriage. But parents have a responsibility to do all that they reasonably can to preserve and repair a marriage, especially when the reasons for divorce are not the most serious ones. Barriers to leaving a marriage, such as financial worries, can keep marriages together in the short run. However, unless there is improvement in the relationship, eventually the barriers are usually not enough to keep a marriage together in the long run.

Divorce is both very personal and all too common. But there are many myths about divorce. Individuals at the crossroads of divorce may benefit by knowing the research facts about divorce rates, factors that are associated with a higher risk of divorce, and common reasons that people give for divorcing.

A. What percentage of marriages end in divorce?

In the United States, researchers estimate that 40%–50% of all first marriages will end in divorce or permanent separation.⁵⁶ The risk of divorce is even higher for second marriages, about 60%.⁵⁷ Utah's divorce rate is just slightly above the national average.⁵⁸

Divorce has always been present in American society.⁵⁹ Although divorce has always been a concern, it has become more common in the last 50 years. The highest divorce rates ever recorded were in the 1970s and early 1980s. Since then the divorce rate actually has decreased a little, but it still remains at a historically high rate.⁶⁰

B. What factors are associated with a higher risk for divorce?

To say that nearly half of all first marriages end in divorce sounds a lot like saying marriage is just a game of chance. But a lot of research has identified various factors that are associated with a higher risk for divorce. So some people actually have a low risk of divorce while others have a high risk. Understanding these factors may not directly help you improve your marriage or make a decision about divorce, but it may help you understand why you may be facing some challenges. Of course, these factors do not guarantee that you will divorce; they simply increase your risk. Here are some factors that appear to increase the risk of divorce the most. But it is not a complete list of risk factors.

1. **Young age.** Marriage at a very young age increases the likelihood of divorce, especially in the early years of marriage. Those who marry in their teens have much higher divorce rates. By about age 21 or 22, however, that risk goes down dramatically.⁶¹ Utahns do tend to marry young compared to the national average. The average age at first marriage for Utah is 22 for women and 23 for men.⁶² Those who delay marriage until their 20s are probably more mature and able to make better marriage decisions and handle the challenges of married life better than those who marry in their teens.
2. **Less education.** Researchers have estimated that individuals who have some college education (vs. not finishing high school) have a lower chance of divorce.⁶³ Utahns are more likely to graduate from high school and get some college education than Americans in general.⁶⁴ Apparently, investing in education is a good way to build a foundation for a better marriage, not just a better job.
3. **Less income.** Closely related to education is income. Researchers have estimated that individuals with annual incomes of more than \$50,000 have a lower chance of divorce (compared to individuals with annual incomes less than \$25,000).⁶⁵ Finances can be stressful. Apparently having at least a modest income can help couples avoid stresses that can lead to divorce.

4. Premarital cohabitation. Couples who live together before marriage appear to have a much higher chance of divorce if they marry.⁶⁶ However, this risk is mostly for those who live together with more than one partner. Most only live together with one partner (whom they later marry) and these couples don't seem to be at a lot greater risk for divorce.⁶⁷ The idea that living together before marriage increases your risk for divorce goes against a lot of common beliefs that it is a good way to get to know each other better and prepare for marriage.⁶⁸ Living together may be a way to get to know each other better, but other things about living together apparently do not help—and even hurt—your chances for a successful marriage, especially if you live together with several people before marrying. Researchers have found that those who live together already have or develop more lenient attitudes about divorce. But some researchers also think that living together may hinder building a strong commitment to each other and the importance of marriage.⁶⁹
5. Premarital childbearing and pregnancy. Pregnancy and childbearing prior to marriage significantly increase the likelihood of future divorce.⁷⁰ In America, more than one-third (37%) of children are born to parents who are not married,⁷¹ and few of these parents eventually marry.⁷² Most of those parents will separate before the child begins school, and some will never really get together. Fortunately, Utah's rate of unwed births is one of the lowest in the nation.⁷³
6. No religious affiliation. Researchers have estimated that individuals who report belonging to some religious group have a somewhat lower chance of divorce than those who say they have no religious affiliation.⁷⁴ And if couples share the same religious affiliation, their chances of divorce are even lower.⁷⁵
7. Parents' divorce. Of course, some risk factors for divorce you can't control. If you experienced the divorce of your parents, unfortunately that doubles your risk for divorce. And if your spouse also experienced his or her parents' divorce, then your risk for divorce more than triples.⁷⁶ This is scary, but it doesn't doom your marriage to failure. It does suggest that individuals who experienced the divorce of their parents need to work even harder to make good marriage choices and to keep their marriage strong and happy.
8. Insecurity. Researchers have found that some personality factors put people at more risk for divorce. One of the most important is feeling insecure about yourself and your self-worth. Insecure individuals are more likely to become

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unhappy in their marriages over time and to divorce.⁷⁷ However, even feelings of insecurity and other personality characteristics can be overcome.⁷⁸

C. What are the most common reasons people give for their divorce?

The previous section explained what factors increase the chances of divorce. Of course, when you ask people why they got divorced they generally don't say things like, "I didn't have enough education," or "My parents were divorced." When asked this question, divorced individuals usually respond with more personal reasons.

Researchers have identified the most common reasons people give for their divorces. A recent national survey⁷⁹ found that the most common reason given for divorce was "lack of commitment" (73% said this was a major reason). Other significant reasons included too much arguing (56%), infidelity (55%), marrying too young (46%), unrealistic expectations (45%), lack of equality in the relationship (44%), lack of preparation for marriage (41%), and abuse (29%). (People often give more than one reason, so the percentages add up to more than 100%.) A recent survey of Utah adults found results similar to this national survey.⁸⁰ Looking at this list, some believe that it is possible to fix many of these problems and prevent some divorces. Couples can learn how to avoid destructive arguments and solve their differences better; they can create more realistic expectations for their marriage; and they can create more equal partnerships. Even such damaging problems as infidelity (affairs) sometimes can be overcome, especially with professional and/or religious help. (We discuss recovering from infidelity later in this chapter.)

It is interesting to note that a significant number of divorced individuals—maybe about half—report to researchers that they wished they or their ex-spouse had tried harder to work through their differences.⁸¹ When Utahns were asked this question, 31% of men who had divorced said they wished that they had worked harder to save their marriage (and 74% said they wished their ex-wife had worked harder to save the marriage); 13% of women who had divorced said they wished that they had worked harder to save their marriage (and 65% said they wished their ex-husband had worked harder to save the marriage).⁸² As we mentioned in Chapter 2, researchers estimated that about one in three couples who actually divorce later try to reconcile.⁸³ This suggests that they ended up regretting their decision to divorce. You might benefit from doing exercise 3.1, "Thinking About Your Reasons For a Possible Divorce" at the end of this chapter.

D. Why is commitment so important to a successful marriage?

As we noted above, the number one reason people give for why their marriage didn't succeed is a lack of commitment on one or both spouses' parts. It may be helpful to focus on this issue of commitment. Researchers have found that about half of all divorces come from relatively low-conflict relationships.⁸⁴ Interestingly, when viewed at one

point in time, these low-conflict marriages that end in divorce look very similar to happy marriages that don't end in divorce. In fact, researchers have a hard time distinguishing between these two groups of married couples except for one important factor. The difference appears to be in the level of commitment. Low-conflict individuals who are not very happy in their marriage but have higher levels of commitment to the marriage are more likely to stay together and try and make things better rather than divorce to see if they could be happier in another relationship.⁸⁵

One prominent marriage researcher and therapist, Dr. Scott Stanley at the University of Denver, defines commitment as having a long-term view of the marriage that helps us not get overwhelmed by the problems and challenges day to day. We keep our eyes focused on the valued prize—a healthy, stable marriage—and work to get there.⁸⁶

Researchers have identified two elements of commitment.⁸⁷ The first is constraint commitment. These are things that keep us in the marriage even if things aren't going so well; for example, social pressure from family or friends, financial worries, children, religious or moral beliefs about divorce, and fear about the future. We often think about constraints as negative things in a society that values choice and freedom so highly. But constraints also can serve the purpose of keeping us from jumping ship when leaks appear in our marriage, as they always do. This is the kind of commitment “Keeshaw” was referring to in our interview as she discussed how she and her husband, “Doug,” were able to halt their path to divorce:

In a way, I don't think I've ever wanted to divorce. I'd say one of the biggest goals of my life, watching my parents' [failed marriage], was to build a good marriage, so a lot of that had to do with me saying that this is really important.

When we interviewed “Trisha,” it was clear that constraint commitment, and in particular, concerns for how divorce would affect her children and how she would support her family, were keeping her from a divorce:

There are periods of time where I feel like I can't do it anymore, but literally, I have stayed with him because of my kids. . . . I just really feel like it would just mess up their world too much. . . . If I could leave, I would leave. In fact, I think if things were a perfect situation for me now, I would still leave. So, I guess, yes, on the one hand, I stay together because of the kids, but also because, what am I going to do with five kids? And where am I going to go and how am I going to support them? . . . I feel like I'm trapped a lot. But I just put on a happy face and keep going. But not because I want to but because I feel like I'm forced, I feel like I have to, that I have no other options, at least no options that appeal to me in any way. . . . Are you going to trade a marriage that you're not happy in for a really hard life of being a single mom? . . . Can I just accept the way things are? It's not like I get beat up. It's not like I'm being abused in any way, other than I just feel like I have a loveless marriage, that we are just business partners. He does his thing; I do my thing to help things move along for the family. Can I accept that? I still don't know if I can accept it.

However, if this is the only kind of commitment in a marriage, then the marriage is not likely to survive long term. You might sense that from “Trisha’s” comments. She is constantly struggling with the option of divorce. Her situation actually is unusual because she has struggled with these feelings for nearly 20 years; it’s unusual for constraints like this to hold a marriage together that long without developing a second, stronger form of commitment: personal dedication. This involves a real desire to be together with one’s spouse in the future, a sense of “we-ness,” or an identity as a couple, not just two individuals. It also involves making the relationship and the spouse a priority, and a willingness to sacrifice for the spouse. It also means making the choice to give up other choices, so we stay focused on our spouse and on our marriage rather than wondering about other possibilities. When there is high dedication commitment in a relationship, we feel safer and are willing to give more for the relationship to succeed. Personal dedication is the kind of commitment that was saving “Keeshaw’s” and “Doug’s” marriage:

(“Keeshaw”) I changed my focus from, “Should we get a divorce?” to “Okay, we’ve been through all these hard things and we’ve made it through. I sure hope it doesn’t keep going like this, but we’re going to keep trying and this is a challenge that is worth taking up.” (“Doug”) “What we decided was that from here on out this is our marriage now, and we’re going to be committed to each other. And we had to lay that foundation again, because it felt like something was broken.”

When commitment seems to be fading, it can be helpful to remember the good times in the relationship and to talk about your dreams for the future together. You may benefit from doing exercise 3.2, “Thinking About Commitment in My Marriage,” at the end of this chapter.

E. Are there clearly valid reasons for divorce? Are abuse, infidelity, or addictions valid reasons?

Research can provide important facts, but research alone can’t answer questions of moral judgment. Most Americans (70%) believe that divorce, in general, is a morally acceptable choice.⁸⁸ And many feel that divorce is a personal, private matter and that it is their choice alone whether or not to divorce. Legally, this is correct. Some individuals may feel that a few months of arguments and disappointments justifies their divorce, while other couples will stay together even through infidelity and abuse. In our opinion, it is important for the law to allow the option of divorce. Divorce actually protects and highlights the moral boundaries around marriage. There are circumstances and behaviors that clearly violate those boundaries. Individuals have the right to be physically and emotionally safe in a relationship. And society has the right to try to protect the moral boundaries of marriage to preserve the integrity and even sacred nature of such an important institution as marriage. The stakes are even higher when children are involved because those children have a stake in the marriage. And society has a stake in the well-being of the next generation. As we will discuss in Chapter 5, family breakdown puts children at greater risk for many serious problems. Most children are better off when their

parents can resolve their difficulties and keep the family together. (Of course, our current laws allow one spouse to end a marriage at any time for any reason without the agreement of the other spouse. So many times a divorce is not a choice for an individual but an unwelcome fact.)

While we believe that divorce is necessary and right at times, we also believe that parents have a heavy responsibility to do all that they reasonably can to preserve and repair a marriage. This is especially true when the reasons for divorce are not the most serious ones. We don't think this is a radical perspective to hold about divorce. In fact, public opinion polls suggest that nearly half of Americans (43%) agree that, in the absence of violence and extreme conflict, parents who have an unsatisfactory marriage should stay together.⁸⁹ About one in three Utahns (31%) say that, when there are children in a marriage, parents should stay married even if they don't get along.⁹⁰ But when individuals are deeply unhappy in their marriages, for whatever reasons, it is only natural in our society to wonder if things wouldn't be better for everyone if the marriage were ended. In some circumstances, we believe—and research supports—that divorce is the better option. In other circumstances, we believe—and again research supports—that the best option for all would be to repair the relationship and keep the family together, if possible. (We will review this research later.)

What you believe about divorce, however, is more important to your circumstances than what we believe. You may benefit from doing exercise 3.3, “Personal Philosophy About Divorce,” at the end of the chapter.

Abuse in marriages. Abuse in marriages deserves special consideration. As we said earlier, there are behaviors that are clearly outside the moral boundaries of marriage. And all have the right to be safe—physically, emotionally, and sexually—in their marriages. This includes adults and children. In our interview with “Vera,” we learned of her decision to end a marriage when she found out that two of her children were being abused by their father:

Two of my children came to me and told me their father had sexually abused them. At that moment I was done. That night I made sure my children were not at home—I worked nights—and the next day I confronted him and told him he no longer lived with us. . . . He was very angry. “You can’t do this to me. What do you think you’re doing? You can’t do this on your own. I didn’t do anything. I don’t know what you’re thinking.” He made several comments like that over time, and I finally just lost it and got right in his face. He’d never seen me lose my temper like that. “Who do you think you are? You are done.” And I told him explicitly what I knew (about the abuse). . . . It was absolutely the right decision (to divorce). There was no other option.

“Vera” reported in our interview that her children, though still dealing with the long-term problems of being sexually abused, were in better shape because she terminated the marriage. When there is abuse in a marriage or in a family, not surprisingly there is evidence that ending the marriage may be best for all involved. Abused wives who divorce usually are better off than those who remain in this unsafe relationship.⁹¹ Also, children

whose parents are in a high-conflict or abusive marriage generally are better off if their parents divorce than if they stay married.⁹² And boys who view violence in their families growing up are much more likely to become abusive in their personal relationships as adults.⁹³ One of the unfortunate facts of family life is that severe abuse seldom corrects itself. So leaving an abusive situation, although difficult and sometimes even dangerous, is probably the right thing to do for the family.

One thing to note, however, is that researchers are learning that there are at least two different kinds of relationship violence: “situational couple violence” and “intimate partner terrorism.”⁹⁴ Usually when we talk

There are at least two different kinds of relationship violence including situational couple violence and intimate partner terrorism.

about abuse we mean the latter. Intimate partner terrorism is about domination and control of one spouse by the other. It is almost always men who are guilty of this kind of abuse. These men often have a need for power and control. Some also struggle with controlling their impulses and often have hostile feelings towards women in general. Intimate partner terrorism can be physical or psychological control. It can be sexual force. (Utah has a law against marital rape.) It can involve severe economic control, such as not

allowing a wife to have access to any money. Sometimes it involves almost completely isolating a wife from her family and friends. And sadly, this kind of abuse usually gets worse and more severe over time. If you are the victim of this kind of abuse, seek help. You probably will need to end the marriage.

On the other hand, there is a different kind of abuse in intimate relationships called “situational” or “common couple violence.” Any kind of aggression or violence in a relationship is unhealthy and can harm adults and children. But situational couple violence is not as severe and dangerous as intimate partner terrorism. It involves things like pushing, shoving, kicking, slapping, shouting, name-calling, etc., and it appears that it does not escalate to more severe aggression.⁹⁵ Situational couple violence often comes when someone is experiencing a lot of stress about something. Men and women appear to do it in equal amounts, although men do more damage and their aggression tends to create fear in the relationship.⁹⁶ This abuse seems to be more about ineffective problem-solving skills rather than power or control. And as people get older this kind of abuse usually decreases, suggesting that immaturity is a factor. Thus, as people become more mature and as they learn better problem-solving skills, this kind of aggression appears to decrease. If this kind of aggression exists in your marriage, you and your spouse can learn to solve your problems more effectively. As you do so, and as violence is eliminated, you may be able to avoid divorce. (See chapter 2 about resources to improve your problem-solving skills and relationship.)

You may want to look at Box 3.1, “Signs of Abuse.” Also, you may benefit from doing exercise 3.4, “Is There Abuse in My Marriage?” at the end of this chapter. There are

resources and services for victims of domestic abuse in many counties in Utah. You can simply call 211 for a list of those services in your area or go online at www.211utah.org.

One final thought about abuse to consider. Some people think that because there is a risk of abuse in marriage, they won't marry. But research shows that married individuals are much less likely to experience abuse than unmarried individuals living together or dating, even when taking account of other differences between these two groups of people, such as education and income.⁹⁷ So when people are in romantic relationships, marriage is the safest relationship.

Box 3.1: Signs of Abuse
from The National Domestic Violence Hotline http://www.ndvh.org/educate/what_is_dv.html)

You may be in an emotionally abusive relationship if your partner:

- Calls you names, insults you, or continually criticizes you.
- Does not trust you and acts jealous or possessive.
- Tries to isolate you from family or friends.
- Monitors where you go, who you call, and who you spend time with.
- Does not want you to work outside the home.
- Controls finances or refuses to share money.
- Punishes you by withholding affection.
- Expects you to ask permission.
- Threatens to hurt you, the children, your family, or your pets.
- Humiliates you in any way.

You may be in a physically abusive relationship if your partner has ever:

- Damaged property when angry (thrown objects, punched walls, kicked doors, etc.).
- Pushed, slapped, bitten, kicked, or choked you.
- Abandoned you in a dangerous or unfamiliar place.
- Scared you by driving recklessly.

- Used a weapon to threaten or hurt you.
- Forced you to leave your home.
- Trapped you in your home or kept you from leaving.
- Prevented you from calling police or seeking medical attention.
- Hurt your children.
- Used physical force in sexual situations.

You may be in a sexually abusive relationship if your partner:

- Views women as objects and believes in rigid gender roles.
- Accuses you of cheating or is often jealous of your outside relationships.
- Wants you to dress in a sexual way.
- Insults you in sexual ways or calls you sexual names.
- Has ever forced or manipulated you into to having sex or performing sexual acts.
- Held you down during sex.
- Demanded sex when you were sick, tired, or after beating you.
- Hurt you with weapons or objects during sex.
- Involved other people in sexual activities with you.
- Ignored your feelings regarding sex.

Infidelity in Marriage. Unfortunately, too many couples face the challenge of infidelity; that is, one or both spouses have been sexually unfaithful. Infidelity is one of the leading causes of divorce; it nearly doubles the chance that a couple will get divorced.⁹⁸ And even though we live in a sexually tolerant society, still more than 90% of Americans say infidelity is morally wrong.⁹⁹ Although it is hard to do research on how common infidelity is, about 4% of married men and 2% of married women report anonymously to researchers that they were unfaithful to their spouses in the last year. Although most married people appear to be faithful, research suggests that about 10%–15% of women and 20%–25% of men tell researchers that they were unfaithful to their spouse while they were married.¹⁰⁰ Of course, it's possible the actual numbers are somewhat higher than this.

The discovery of infidelity is usually traumatic and recovering from infidelity is difficult.¹⁰¹ Therapists who help couples deal with infidelity describe three stages in the process of recovering from infidelity:¹⁰² (1) absorbing and dealing with the traumatic impact of infidelity; (2) creating meaning for why the affair occurred; and (3) moving forward with one's life—either together or apart—with this new understanding. In the first stage, individuals find that their whole world seems to be upside down. They may struggle to function with day-to-day life. They struggle to go on with life when something so fundamental in their life is broken. They have to find ways to absorb this change and still function. Next, they have to find understanding and meaning about the infidelity. They need to know why it happened. And then they need to explore ways to recover and rebuild trust and intimacy. To do this, they need to find some level of safety and security again in the relationship. Then they need to develop a realistic and balanced view of their relationship, including the positives and the negatives. They need to find a way to let go of the negative emotions connected with the infidelity. The injured spouse needs to voluntarily let go of her or his desire to punish the participating partner. Often the offending spouse has to find a way to let go of his or her guilt. And finally, they need to evaluate carefully their relationship and reach healthy decisions about whether to stay together and keep working to improve the relationship or to separate.

Opinion polls show that nearly two out of three (63%) married Americans say they would not forgive their spouse (and would get a divorce) if they found out their spouse had a sexual affair.¹⁰³ This was the case for “Fran.” She found out about her husband's infidelity when she discovered she had contracted a venereal disease:

I decided when I found out on the hospital table that I had gonorrhea that we were divorced already . . . He tried to talk me out of it, and so did his mother and his father, and my mother, and various aunts and uncles and brothers and sisters, but I was very willful and stubborn, and I would not be appeased. I was furious [about his infidelity]. The marriage was over, personally.

Many couples who have dealt with infidelity in their marriages, however, find the will and the strength to stay together. Researchers have found that while most people say they would get a divorce if they discovered their spouse was unfaithful, in actuality, 50%–60% of married couples who experience infidelity stay together.¹⁰⁴ “Brittany”

described the difficult choice she faced at one point. She decided to work hard and try to repair the damage to her marriage:

I had to make a decision: Am I willing to work through this situation [infidelity] with him which is going to be a long-term thing? And how will that impact me for the rest of my life? How am I going to feel about us? How am I going to trust again? Can I love him with all of my heart again? I'm telling you, that's a hard, hard, hard, hard, thing. Harder than I ever thought. Because even though it's been a few years, still, you seem to doubt. . . . In my head I thought, "I love these kids so much, and I want them to have [their parents] together for the rest of our lives." Marriage is a lot of work, and people don't realize that. They just think, "Well, we're married and everything should be total bliss and we should be totally happy for the rest of our lives." Period, end of conversation. And they're not going to have trials. But that is just so not the case.

A few years later, she told us that she is happy in her marriage and is sure she made the right decision to stay and work things out. An excellent resource to learn more about recovering from marital infidelity is the book, *Getting Past the Affair: A Program to Help You Cope, Heal, and Move On—Together or Apart*.¹⁰⁵ Also, you should seriously consider getting help from a well-trained marriage counselor and/or a dedicated religious leader who will help you with the hard work of healing, deciding what to do, and repairing the marriage, if you decide to stay together.

Addictions in marriage. Another difficult problem that can cause people to seriously consider divorce is addiction. One woman we know was stunned when she discovered her husband was addicted to drugs. The drugs led to crime and she was devastated as the story unfolded. But she was determined to fight for her family, especially her two children. The couple separated for a time and after some rehabilitation for the husband and support groups for the wife the family was able to come back together. The addicted spouse had an amazing turn around in his life and the family has been flourishing for several years now. Unfortunately, this family's experience may not be the norm.

In recent years, addiction to pornography has become a challenge to many marriages. Early research suggests that "cybersex addictions" are a major factor contributing to separation and divorce for many couples.¹⁰⁶ Many women view pornography as a form of infidelity.¹⁰⁷ The Internet is used by more than half of Americans and 20%-30% of those people who use the Internet use it for sexual purposes.¹⁰⁸ The majority of people who have sexual addictions involving Internet pornography are married, heterosexual males.¹⁰⁹ Not surprisingly, early research on pornography and marital relationships has found that frequent pornography use tends to be associated with sexually aggressive behavior, sexual deviance, decreased intimacy, decreased sexual satisfaction, and increased marital dissatisfaction.¹¹⁰ One woman we know decided to divorce after she realized the seriousness of the pornography issues her husband faced. Yet another woman decided to support and help her husband through his

addiction. It was a long and arduous path that included having a candid talk about the pornography use, working with a church leader, using support groups, regularly initiating conversation about pornography issues for both the husband and the wife, monitoring computer use, and having tight filters and passwords. This woman feels it was worth the effort. Each person has unique circumstances and must decide what is right for her or him.

F. How do individuals decide to divorce or remain married?

Researchers have found that individuals considering divorce make their decision to stay or leave based on the rewards they gain from the marriage, the barriers against leaving the marriage, their perceptions about finding a better relationship, and the amount of investment they have made in their marriage.¹¹¹ Some individuals decide to stay together even if the rewards from marriage are currently low when there are important barriers to divorce, such as concerns about money, the effects of family breakup on their children, religious beliefs about the importance of marriage, disapproval from family and friends, or fears of being single again.¹¹² Similarly, some will decide to stay with the marriage if they don't think their prospects for a better relationship are good. Also, if individuals have invested many years in a marriage, have children together and a home and other possessions, then they are more hesitant to leave.¹¹³ As we mentioned earlier, barriers to leaving a marriage can keep marriages together in the short run. However, unless there is improvement in the relationship, eventually the barriers are usually not enough to keep a marriage together in the long run.¹¹⁴ Eventually, the rewards of a healthy and happy marriage—love, friendship, and a shared life—are the stronger glue that keeps couples together.

Exercises for Chapter 3

3.1: Thinking About Your Reasons for a Possible Divorce.

A. Below are some of the more common reasons people give for divorce. Consider what role each of these reasons plays in your situation. Circle whether each reason is a major problem, a minor problem, or not a problem in your marriage and may have you thinking about a divorce. (If something is a problem for your spouse but not for you, go ahead and circle what you think your spouse would say.) Then for each reason you checked, take a minute to think about how willing you and your spouse would be to work to make improvements in this area. (Chapter 2 discussed different ways to work to make improvements in your relationship.)

Reason for Divorce/ Problem in Marriage	Is this a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason for thinking about a divorce? (circle one)	How willing would you be to work on making improvements in this area? How willing do you think your spouse would be? 1=Not at all willing 2=A little willing 3=Somewhat willing 4=Very willing n/a=Not applicable in your situation (circle one)
Lack of commitment	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Too much arguing	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Infidelity (unfaithful)	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Unrealistic expectations	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Lack of equality	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Pushing, slapping, yelling, etc.	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Abuse	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Didn't prepare well for marriage	major / minor / not	(Not applicable)
Married too young	major / minor / not	(Not applicable)
Other: _____	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a
Other: _____	major / minor / not	You: 1 2 3 4 n/a Spouse: 1 2 3 4 n/a

3.2: Thinking About Commitment in My Marriage

As we discussed in this chapter, there are two elements of commitment: constraint and personal dedication. Constraint commitment includes those things that keep you in a marriage, even if things aren't going well, like financial worries or concerns about how a divorce might affect your children. In the long run, however, constraint commitment is usually not enough to hold a marriage together; dedication commitment is needed. Dedication commitment is a real desire to be with your spouse, to build a life and a

future together, a willingness to sacrifice for each other. Consider your situation and both elements of commitment and write down your thoughts.

A. Constraints Against Divorce. Think about each of the following and whether it would be a big constraint, a little constraint, or not a constraint against divorce (circle your answer). Then briefly write why it might hold you back from a divorce.

Possible Divorce Constraint	3 = Big 2 = Little 1 = Not a Concern (circle one)	Why?
1. Fear it would hurt my children.	3 2 1	
2. Fear my spouse wouldn't stay involved with the children.	3 2 1	
3. Fear my children would lose contact with extended family members (e.g., spouse's parents).	3 2 1	
4. Financial worries (money would be tight).	3 2 1	
5. Might lose our home and have to move.	3 2 1	
6. Not sure if I could get a good job to support the family.	3 2 1	
7. I might lose health insurance or other benefits from my spouse's job.	3 2 1	
8. My spouse might not pay regular child support.	3 2 1	
9. Fear of what family or friends might think if I get a divorce.	3 2 1	
10. It will feel like a personal failure.	3 2 1	
11. Religious concerns (disapproval of divorce).	3 2 1	
12. Uncertainty about what the future holds for me.	3 2 1	
13. Fear of ever finding another love.	3 2 1	
14. Don't want to have to date again.	3 2 1	

Possible Divorce Constraint	3 = Big 2 = Little 1 = Not a Concern (circle one)	Why?
15. Fear that arguments with my spouse will get worse if we divorce.	3 2 1	
16. Fear of getting abused if I try to get a divorce.	3 2 1	
17. Other:	3 2 1	
18. Other:	3 2 1	
19. Other:	3 2 1	
20. Other:	3 2 1	

Now, stop and think about your responses. What have you learned about the constraints that may or may not hold you back from getting a divorce? Write down a few thoughts.

B. Dedication Commitment. Next, think about your situation and dedication commitment. Even though you may be having some serious problems, how dedicated are you to your spouse? Answer these questions as honestly as possible by circling the number that best describes you. (These questions were developed by prominent researchers who study commitment in relationships.¹¹⁵)

Dedication Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Some-what Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Some-what Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I don't make important commitments unless I will keep them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. My relationship with my spouse is more important to me than anything else in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

3. I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I like to think of my spouse and me more in terms of "us" and "we" than "me" and "him/her."	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. My marriage to my spouse is clearly part of my future plans.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. It makes me feel good to sacrifice for my partner.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I want to have a strong identity as a couple with my spouse.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I want to be with my spouse a few years from now.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I am not seriously attracted to anyone else right now.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I do not think about what it would be like to be with someone else (romantically).	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Now score your dedication commitment by adding up the numbers you circled. Your score: _____

- If your score is higher than 50, you are probably dedicated and committed to your spouse, even if you are having serious problems at this time.
- If your score is 50 or less but more than 30, then you are probably struggling somewhat with dedication and commitment in your marriage at this time.
- If your score is 30 or less, then you are probably not dedicated and committed to your spouse at this time.

C. Increasing Your Commitment. How can you increase your commitment?

One way to increase your dedication commitment is to remember the good times and all the good things you have gone through together. When you are going through hard times, it is so easy to forget these good things. Write your answer to each of these questions.

1. What attracted you to your spouse at first and then later on?

2. What are 2–3 of the happiest times in your marriage? Why?

3. What are 2–3 of the most difficult times in your marriage that you have been able to overcome?

4. What 2–3 important values do you feel you still have in common with your spouse?

5. What 2–3 important goals do you feel you still share with your spouse?

6. What would be the biggest loss if you got divorced?

7. What would be the biggest gain if you can stay together?

8. What three things could you do to increase your dedication commitment and show more loyalty to your spouse? Write them down here.

A.

B.

C.

D. Your Spouse's Commitment. You have been thinking about your commitment to your marriage and your spouse. Obviously, your spouse's commitment to you is equally important. Low commitment from either spouse can make it hard to stay together. But if both are committed, your chances of solving your problems and keeping your marriage together are much better. Take a few minutes now and think about how your spouse might answer the questions in this exercise, "Thinking About Commitment in My Marriage." Of course, this can be hard to do. It's hard to know exactly what your spouse is feeling and thinking. But it may be helpful to try and honestly assess your spouse's commitment. What constraints would be on his/her list? How would he/she score on dedication commitment? How would he/she answer the questions above in part C? What have you learned by thinking about commitment from your spouse's perspective? Write down your thoughts here:

E. Putting It All Together. Considering all the information in this exercise, what do you think about continuing to try and work out the challenges in your relationship? Write down your thoughts here:

3.3: Personal Philosophy About Divorce.

When two people get married, they usually aren't thinking that the marriage will end in divorce. But then hard times arise and sometimes they find themselves thinking either casually or seriously about divorce. But most people haven't really thought carefully about their philosophy of divorce. When, if ever, is it justified? How hard and how long should people try to work things out? Does it make a difference if they have children? Does it matter how old the children are? There are many things to consider, but many people haven't clarified the answers to these questions. This exercise will invite you to do this. Thinking about marriage and divorce in general (not your marriage specifically), answer these questions as honestly as you can.

A. What circumstances do you think could justify divorce?

B. What circumstances do you think do not justify divorce?

C. If the married couple has children, does that affect your answers in A and B above? Do the ages of the children matter?

D. How long do you think a married couple should try to work things out? Does your answer to this question depend on some of the circumstances you wrote about above?

E. What steps do you think people should take before deciding to get divorced? (For instance, get counseling.)

F. Why do think you have these beliefs? What has shaped your beliefs? (For instance, religious principles, family experiences growing up, friends you have observed going through a divorce, your ideological or political views.)

G. Now apply this personal philosophy to your circumstances. How does your personal philosophy guide your thinking about the challenges you are facing in your marriage? What does this mean in terms of thinking about divorce? Write your thoughts here:

Of course, as we have acknowledged many times, your spouse may have a different philosophy and it only takes one person to end a marriage. If it helps, you may want to try and think how your spouse would answer these questions.

3.4: Is There Abuse in My Marriage?

As we discussed in this chapter, there are at least two kinds of violence: “situational couple violence” and “intimate partner terrorism.” Situational couple violence involves things like pushing, shoving, kicking, yelling, etc., and is done by men and women equally, although men generally do more damage than women. When there is situational couple violence in a relationship, the couple needs to improve their communication and problem-solving skills. (Part B of this exercise will help you see if there is this kind of abuse in your marriage.) A second kind of abuse, intimate partner terrorism, is more serious. It involves more severe forms of physical, emotional, and sexual violence, and is done to control the other person. This kind of violence is almost always done by men against women.

A. Assessing Intimate Partner Terrorism.¹¹⁶ This questionnaire can help you judge whether there is intimate partner terrorism in your marriage, a very serious and dangerous form of violence in a relationship. For each question, circle the number that best represents your relationship. Then add up your scores.

My Spouse . . .	Never (0)	Rarely (1)	Sometimes (2)	Often (3)	Almost Always (4)
1. Makes me feel like I’m walking on eggshells to keep the peace	0	1	2	3	4
2. Keeps me away from family and friends	0	1	2	3	4
3. Yells at me often, and calls me names	0	1	2	3	4
4. Doesn’t care about my needs and expectations	0	1	2	3	4
5. Is unpredictable or has sudden mood swings	0	1	2	3	4
6. Puts me down, to look better	0	1	2	3	4
7. Retaliates when I disagree	0	1	2	3	4
8. Breaks or hits things in my presence	0	1	2	3	4
9. Is forceful with things like affection and/or sex	0	1	2	3	4
10. Controls all the money and gives me little or none	0	1	2	3	4
11. Is possessive of me, or jealous of me	0	1	2	3	4
12. Sometimes physically hurts me	0	1	2	3	4
Add up your TOTAL SCORE:					

Compare your score to these categories:

- 0–19 = little risk of abuse
- 20–30 = likelihood of minor abuse
- 31 and higher = likelihood of serious abuse

If your score is higher than 31:

- It is a good idea to get help (see <http://www.ncadv.org/> or a local agency).
- Also, individual counseling, rather than couples' counseling, is probably best.

B. Assessing Situational Couple Violence.¹¹⁷ This questionnaire can help you judge whether there is situational couple violence in your marriage, such as slapping and pushing. Although this kind of physical aggression in marriage is not as serious as intimate partner terrorism, it is still an indication of some unhealthy parts in a marriage.

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree on decisions, get annoyed about something the other person does, or have arguments or fights because they are in a bad mood or for some other reason. A couple may also use many different ways to settle their differences. Below are some things that you or your partner may have done when you had a disagreement or fight. For each question, circle the answer that best represents what your spouse has done. Next, answer the same questions about what you have done.

Thinking about your spouse, during the past 12 months . . .							
1. How many times, if any, has your spouse hit you?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
2. How many times has your spouse twisted your arm or hair?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
3. How many times has your spouse pushed, shoved, or kicked you?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
4. How many times has your spouse grabbed you forcefully?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
5. How many times has your spouse slapped you?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
Now, thinking about yourself, during the past 12 months . . .							
6. How many times, if any, have you hit your spouse?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
7. How many times have you twisted your spouse's arm or hair?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times

8. How many times have you pushed, shoved, or kicked your spouse?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
9. How many times have you grabbed your spouse forcefully?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times
10. How many times have you slapped your spouse?	None	Once	Twice	3–5 Times	6–10 Times	11–20 Times	20+ Times

There is no scale that says how much of this behavior in a relationship is acceptable or how much is “too much.” Any behavior like this in a marriage is unhealthy and indicates a need to improve your communication and problem-solving skills.

- Looking over your answers, what have you learned about “situational couple violence” in your marriage? Have you and your spouse been able to avoid these kinds of behaviors? If so, this is a strength in your relationship. Or do you and your spouse sometimes use these ineffective and unhealthy ways to deal with disagreement and problems? If so, do both of you behave this way sometimes, which is more common, or is it just one of you? Write down your thoughts here:

- If you and/or your spouse sometimes use these ineffective and unhealthy ways to deal with disagreements and problems, how can you improve your ability to discuss things and solve disagreements in a healthier way? You may want to consider some of the marriage education resources suggested in Ch. 2 to improve your communication and problem-solving skills. Write down your thoughts and plans here:
