

Emotional Abandonment: When Your Spouse Shuts You Out

By Dr. Dave Currie, with Glen Hoos ®

It's a complaint I hear regularly from people looking for help for their marriages: *"I feel distant from my spouse."* *"I try to get my husband to open up, but instead he just shuts down."* *"My wife just doesn't seem interested in me anymore. I feel like we're a million miles apart."* *"I don't know if I love him anymore."*

What we're talking about here is emotional abandonment. Instead of physically leaving the relationship, your spouse simply checks out emotionally. They stop investing in the marriage, leaving their mate feeling detached and unwanted. To the outside world the situation can still look rosy, but in reality the relationship is dying a slow, quiet death.

How does a marriage reach this point? Sometimes it's a slow slide into complacency, and other times it's a little more sudden. Realize that if it's a sudden abandonment, there likely is some precipitating event or incident between the two of you that needs to be resolved. On the other hand, if the deterioration has been more gradual, there are probably a lot of little things that have gone unresolved and are taking their toll on the relationship.

Here are some of the specific, primary causes of emotional distance between mates:

1. UNFORGIVENESS

Emotional abandonment is unforgiveness taken to its extreme conclusion. When we feel that our spouse has hurt us and we refuse to forgive them, we look for ways to protect ourselves from being hurt again in the future. Closing off our heart from the other person is an easy way to do this, but it has deadly consequences. Unforgiveness always leads to isolation. Overcoming unforgiveness requires a willingness to humble ourselves and seek forgiveness when we have hurt our spouse, and it also requires that we be willing to graciously extend forgiveness when our spouse has hurt us. This forgiveness step is based on a desire to re-unite.

2. CALLOUS TREATMENT

When I am careless in how I treat my spouse, it gets old really quickly. Whether it's discourteousness, unkindness, or something worse, it creates hurt that may start out small, but can grow into deep wounds as it festers over time. To avoid this, each partner needs to look at their own behavior regularly and consider whether they are treating their spouse well. A mate, above all people, needs to be treated with gentleness and respect. Remember, your spouse is a gift to you, and they deserve to be treated as something precious.

3. LACK OF EFFORT

Sometimes the problem is a little less obvious than unforgiveness or harsh treatment. It is easy, especially for men, to just assume that the relationship is going along just fine, and so we don't put in as much effort as we once did. We start to take our spouse for granted, leading them to think that they are not important in our lives. When the marriage slips from being one of the top priorities in the heart of one or both spouses, the other person feels abandoned. This causes them to feel unwanted and then to withdraw into their own world.

4. LACK OF TIME

Many of us simply try to pack too much into a day. Ruled by the urgent, we fail to make time for the truly important: things like romancing, talking about issues and really developing a friendship with our spouse. We stay constantly busy, erasing quality “couple times” from our schedules. A marriage relationship cannot thrive if our contact with one another is limited to a quick bite of supper or a brief chat before bed. A good marriage requires weekly face-to-face time – both talk and fun.

5. FEAR OF TALKING THROUGH ISSUES

Emotional detachment does not just happen out of the blue; there is always something behind it. If one or both of the spouses has an inability or fear of talking through the issues in their relationship, then this kind of disconnect will be the likely result. Usually both know there is something wrong, but they are hesitant to bring it up because they fear their spouse’s reaction. Or perhaps they feel like they’ve been through this before and it hasn’t helped, so why bother? In these cases, there needs to be a clear second look at what it means to resolve conflict in a marriage - how to have a “good fight,” as it were, that really bring things to resolution. Without these skills, and a real courage to step up and deal with problems, the emotional distance will just continue to grow.

6. LIVING IN DENIAL

A lot of times, when things have started to go a bit sideways in the relationship, we don’t want to admit that it’s happening. Often the person truly needing to make some significant changes is most content to deny the existence of any real issues. We kind of live in denial, as if it’s not really happening, or it’s not that bad, or things will get better in time. But living in denial doesn’t fix things; it only causes the marriage to deteriorate to the point where the couple just does not feel close anymore.

WORKING THROUGH THE EMOTIONAL DISTANCE

The first step to dealing with emotional abandonment is to identify the root cause and to begin to deal with it. Don’t settle for living in isolation. Here are some suggestions for re-establishing a loving connection with your spouse:

1. AGREE TO TALK

At some point you have to agree to talk about the problems that exist between you. If you’re going to resolve issues, there needs to be a mutual commitment to listen to the other person’s concerns and to work towards improving the situation. Don’t corner your spouse with an unexpected lecture, but set a time and agree to start to work through your issues.

2. BE PREPARED

Before you have the talk, take the time separately to think through the unresolved issues that you’ll be discussing. What are your concerns in the relationship? In what areas do you feel you need to improve? What are your expectations of your spouse? To put your thoughts down on paper may be best, but either way, be prepared to be open and honest with each other about the real issues between you. Be sure to take the time to really listen to what your spouse is saying. Give each other uninterrupted time to share your view on things.

3. BE DIRECT BUT GENTLE

Neither of you has anything to gain by holding back your true feelings. Remember: unresolved issues lie at the heart of emotional detachment. So lay all your cards out on the table by sharing your hurts clearly. Don't allow things to get out of hand. Be committed to talk through things sensibly. Take breaks to cool it if necessary but agree to continue. Ask each other the tough questions, and talk through the difficult issues that have been eating away at your relationship. Regardless of which partner initiated the wrong, you both need to work at resolving the problem.

4. BEGIN TO MEET UNMET NEEDS

Often a person pulls back from the relationship because, in their mind, their needs are not being met. A healthy marriage demands that both partners actively work to discern the needs of their spouse, and work to meet those needs. Seek to understand your spouse's needs and ask yourself how you can start to better express love by meeting these needs. Make your spouse and sorting things out your new priority.

5. DEAL WITH YOUR OWN STUFF

If I am feeling abandoned by my spouse, I need to ask myself a tough question: *What have I done to drive my spouse away?* Now it may not be only your responsibility. Nevertheless, you have to find out what you are responsible for and take ownership for your actions. Really listen to your spouse. Of course, there are things that your mate needs to deal with, and they may be withdrawing from you for selfish reasons, but that can't stop you from taking the steps that you know you need to take. Both parties must be prepared to make apologies and extend forgiveness as part of your recovery from the emotional detachment.

6. INTENTIONALLY RE-ENGAGE

If you are to re-establish your emotional connection, it won't happen by accident and it won't happen overnight. You need to agree to make your relationship a priority and spend some quality time together. Plan a few dates and put each other in your schedules. It's time to re-enter one another's lives again.

7. ACT KINDLY

This may not be a revolutionary new idea, but it can have that kind of an effect on your marriage. You must act kindly toward your spouse. Small gestures of warmth, acts of kindness, and efforts to rekindle the romance between you will go a long way toward renewing your bond with one another. Do this from the heart with real commitment to make the necessary changes.

8. LOVE UNCONDITIONALLY

Somebody has to break out of the negative cycle of eye-for-an-eye, poor treatment for poor treatment. You need to step out of the insult-for-insult cycle and respond differently. You cannot control your spouse's behavior, but you can control your own. Regardless of how your spouse responds, you must choose to treat them with love. This is not easy to do when your partner is not reciprocating, but it is what you vowed to do when you promised to love each other "for better or for worse." And nothing breaks down emotional barriers like unconditional love.