



Alternative To Divorce - The Marriage Sabbatical by Arlen Keith Leight, Ph.D.

Just as individuals go through predictable stages of adult development so do relationships. These stages precipitate conflicts as well as clashes of needs. Mature relationships often bring on a sense of boredom or a feeling that the individuals have “grown apart.” While commitment may be strong, communication may have deteriorated as a result of anticipated hurt and/or rejection. Often one or both partners feel trapped in the connection with strong ambivalence about staying together.

Many couples end up resigning themselves to an unhappy or unsatisfactory marriage; others simply split up seeing no way forward. A little talked about, middle-of-the-road option is the so-called “marriage sabbatical” in which the individuals take some needed time and space to help balance needs for intimacy and autonomy. It gives the partners an opportunity to explore an unsettled sense of self. It potentially lays the groundwork for a refreshed relationship renewal or for a respectful relationship termination.

After attempts at sustained couples therapy appear to have failed, the indications for a marriage sabbatical are:

1. Your relationship is filled with extreme conflict, tension, pain and/or anxiety.
2. Your relationship is very low energy or you feel burned-out or bored.
3. You are highly confused or ambivalent about your relationship.
4. You’ve lost your sense of self and don’t know who you are anymore.
5. You feel down on yourself and your self-esteem is shot.
6. You are yearning for emotional and sexual intimacy that is no longer present.

The sabbatical may take many different forms depending on the needs, desires and financial considerations of the specific couple. If a short time-out is all that is needed, separate vacations or a few weeks apart may do the trick. When the challenges run deep, living separately for 3 to 12 months to assess one’s own path and his/her partner’s role in his/her life may be required. If financially impossible to physically separate, there may be a reorganization of household space, taking separate bedrooms, and a reassessment of the time spent together. Whether living separately or not, agreements regarding how and how often to communicate, how and how often to see one another, whether to have sexual relations together or even whether it is okay to experience sexual exploration outside of the relationship are all a part of the sabbatical contract.

The sabbatical is a trial separation of sorts, but it differs in that it is structured and purposeful. The purpose and parameters for a marriage sabbatical are best explored, negotiated, and contracted with a well trained and experienced couples therapist who understands the sabbatical process as an exploration and not a separation. These sorts of alternatives to divorce may help couples who are “stuck” in dysfunctional relationships and need time for personal growth and development before making a recommitment to the marriage or moving on. The hope is to break dysfunctional relationship patterns, gain perspective on the relationship, realize what your partner really means to you, create a context for personal growth and change, and find a balance between autonomy and intimacy that works for you.

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Arlen Keith Leight, Ph.D., LLC



When couples choose to stay together after a sabbatical they usually do so with a new understanding of themselves, their needs and their desires. When couples decide to divorce they usually do so more amicably because the partners truly know why they are separating. The decision to move on then is more likely by mutual choice and therefore less victimization occurs. It has been my experience that couples who are mature enough and secure enough to negotiate a temporary break find in the renewed sense of self an ability to re-engage more honestly and lovingly, and they are able to work through differences and/or re-energize the connection more easily and completely.

Having challenges in your relationship? Consider Communication for Intimate Couples and/or Personality Type and Intimacy