



***Couples desperately seek help when their marriage reaches crisis state, but end up terribly disappointed with the outcome.***

The purpose of this writing is to provide insight and detail about why couples going for marriage therapy are often disappointed in the process. Since 2005 when Trudy Johnson, PhD., began her career helping couples at a Christian Intensive Therapy Center in Colorado ([www.crossroadscounseling.net](http://www.crossroadscounseling.net)), her heart has been to help couples find peace and balance in their marriage experience. She has provided intensive marriage weeks for couples since then.

Trudy Johnson, PhD., LMFT, Founder  
A'nesis Retreats and Counseling Sabbaticals  
[www.anesisretreats.com](http://www.anesisretreats.com)

All images in this writing are used with permission by Storyblocks© except for the photo of Dr. Trudy Johnson and that is used with permission by missingpieces.org©

# PROLOGUE:

In my career as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist I've found that at around the eighteen year mark, marriages need to re-define . This is an *observation* from me, but not verifiable with statistical data.

This re-defining means that marriages need to move from what I call a "teen-age" marriage to an adult relationship with true mature connection. The "teen-age" marriage mimics a teen-age dating relationship which can be full of drama, unresolved ups and downs or chaotic break ups and make ups.

From this "teen-age stage", marriages will either break up for good (divorce) or find another girlfriend or boyfriend (affair) or move into a dead marriage. Dead marriages are committed but there is no connection or healthy communication.

It's at this stage, the re-definition stage, that the marriage typically makes an appointment for a counseling session. Like ambulances arriving at the emergency room unloading mangled bodies, there is a deep expectation and hope that the therapist will resuscitate the dying marriage.



# MARRIAGE COUNSELING IS THE LEAST EFFECTIVE TYPE OF THERAPY!

*A surprising Consumer Reports© study verifies that marriage counseling may not be effective.*

Consumer Reports found that more than 50% of couples who underwent counseling saw their marriages either get worse or remain unchanged. Marriage Counseling has the lowest rating of satisfaction of all the different types of psychotherapy. <sup>1</sup>

My first experience with marriage counseling as a newly licensed therapist was traumatizing to say the least. From that first incident until now, decades later, I admit I've developed a love/hate relationship with marriage therapy. The experience can be so full of "highs" and "lows" emotionally.

When I read this research from Consumer Reports, I simultaneously felt pause and peace. I was saddened thinking about all the couples going through the counseling process who *still* were unable to "make it" for the long haul.

## WHY?

---

<sup>1</sup> APA Psych Net, *The Effectiveness of Psychotherapy, The Consumer Reports Study*, Seligman, Martin E.P., American Psychologist, 0150(12) Dec 1995, 965-974

I was relieved to think that some of the responsibility for failure could roll off my shoulders. Marriage counseling is a tough profession. The therapist is working with two people who have two distinct personalities and woundings sitting in intense pain.

I was shocked to realize that even on my best days there was a possibility of only 50% chance of success.

I've met with couples in many stages of conflict. I've listened to the pain of affairs and other betrayals, addictions, hiding, lying and frozen emotions. This booklet details some reasons why I think marriage counseling doesn't work and what I think the answer can be for couples in distress.



# REASON ONE:

## WAITED TOO LONG

Research shows that the average couple does not go for help until six years *after* needing therapy. John Gottman and his wife Julie are amazing marriage therapists. They have compiled years of verifiable statistics concerning marriage ([www.gottman.com](http://www.gottman.com)) Gottmans say that couples are six years past going for help when they finally arrive for their first counseling session.

Imagine having cancer but not going for medical help until six years after you suspect the problem. We know the key to success in treatment of disease is early detection. Couples stay in denial too long and probably are thinking with rose colored glasses that things will “eventually straighten out and get better.”

Not. This is stinking thinking. Waiting six years post detection of trouble makes it very hard to recover. Hearts can be so self-protected from the lack of connection it will take an enormous amount of work for each party to finally get to a place of being able to even start the process of healing.

Typically, waiting too long causes something I call “emotional divorce.”



## **EMOTIONAL DIVORCE INDICATORS:**

Little or no eye contact

Lack of sharing on a personal level- surface conversation only

Lack of checking in with each other on a daily basis

Conversations begin harshly

Conversations begin with criticism

Lack of humor in daily interactions

Lack of interest in each others interests

Living separate lives in the same house (sleeping, eating)

Lack of awareness of each others dreams, hopes or personal goals

Apathy about the other persons emotional state

Daydreaming about separate lives

Making decisions about major purchases on your own

No fun in downtimes; Fun times are separate from each other

Have a hard time thinking positively about spouse.

Very few positive recent memories with spouse.

Shutdown at the sound of spouse's voice.

Past memories of spouse seem more like manipulation now.

# REASON TWO:

## HARDENED HEARTS

*"In Moses day, divorce was granted because of hardness of heart." (Matthew 19:8 NIV).*

Jesus himself said the "in Moses day, divorce was granted because of hardness of heart." (Matthew 19:8NIV).

A state of hardened heart can be an outcome of waiting too long to go for help. There is a physical symptom of heart disease that many times shows up in autopsies. Calcifications can be identified where the heart tissue has actually hardened so much that there are real calcified cells present. Literally, the heart can experience hardening if it needs to stay in a constant state of self-protection. When couples can only view each other in a negative state to self-protect from pain, it is really difficult to walk that back.

Even the most experienced marriage therapist will have a difficult time intervening in a situation where one or both spouses has a heart of stone. As an addendum to this subject see reason seven.





# REASON THREE:

## BAGGAGE

**85% of problems in marriage were *brought into the marriage!*** <sup>2</sup>

Another amazing statistic is that 85% of problems in marriage were brought into the marriage from the family of origin or pre-existing conditions. Once again there are several reasons couples begin their marriage with baggage.

Because contributions to a person's 85% can be quite a list, I am detailing each separately. Couples can have one or all of these indicators that will contribute to the demise of their future marriage relationship.

**Unfortunately, the impact of past painful learning experiences *may not surface in the dating stage.* It is only when that person gets into a committed relationship that the problems arise.**

Anyone recognizing their 85% of the contribution of the demise of the marriage in this information should consider individual therapy to resolve some of these past woundings.



---

<sup>2 2</sup> Research by Kimberly Newell  
www.OPenStax-CNX module: m45043

## ATTACHMENT INJURIES

If a person comes from a background of intense abandonment from their family of origin they can experience terror when it comes to being vulnerable and attaching in a serious relationship.

**Unfortunately, this symptom may not show itself until married.** As long as the person is single and able to “run” or exit the relationship they are fine. Entering a committed relationship can produce an extreme level of fear. This is when the attachment injury will rear its ugly head.

This causes the person to de-tach and become an avoider. Oppositely, they might become needy and extremely insecure. Again, the confusion is that usually NONE of these symptoms will surface until the person gets into a committed relationship. This leaves the spouse confused about why the connection changed from the dating relationship.

I’ll always remember one female client who actually “saw” her husband detach and shut down at the altar taking the vows. His countenance changed, he detached and sadly, he never “returned to connection” in the marriage



## SEXUAL TRAUMA

I cannot stress enough the impact of sexual trauma or molestation on a future marriage relationship. Like attachment injuries, *the outcome of sexual trauma does not always show itself until that person becomes “trapped” in a committed relationship.*

Sexual trauma touches every area of intimacy and will cause extreme difficulties for spouses being vulnerable in marriage. It is well advised for anyone with sexual trauma in their past to get their own personal healing, which in turn will bring improvement to their marriage. It is important to realize sexual trauma can be far reaching. It involves both husbands and wives and most of the time the injury happened in childhood.

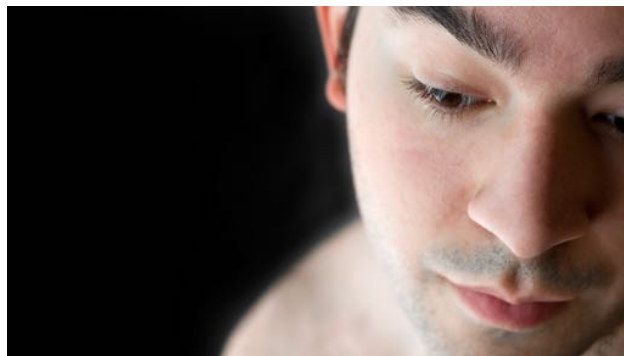
## EARLY EXPOSURE TO PORNOGRAPHY

*90% of teen boys will have viewed pornography by age 16. 70% of 16-18 year olds have viewed hard core pornography according to George Barna, a Christian statistical gathering group.*

Typically, from four years on, many have been exposed to and or are addicted to pornography. Pornography is an evil disrupter of heart connection. It promises more than it ever delivers. Pornography provides counterfeit connection in a much safer way than a “real relationship.”

Exposure to pornography at an early age ignites brain chemicals earlier than an underdeveloped brain is capable of handling. This causes an imbalance in “real attachment.” Attachment with a person will seem less exciting and harder work.

Pornography makes “attachment” safe and easy with zero chance of rejection. Pornography addiction is something that needs addressed for any person thinking that getting married will make the addiction go away. Sadly, it will probably make it worse. Pervasive addiction to pornography should be addressed, individually, apart from marriage counseling sessions.



## **NO EXAMPLE**

In marriage counseling sessions I always put the couples' individual Genograms (symbols representing their family system) on the whiteboard. When we discuss what they learned from their parents it is eye-opening for the couple.

More often than not, our cultural break down has affected so many. Most couples are survivors of broken homes and have had very little examples of what a healthy marriage relationship looks like. Many spouses only know what they "don't want."

Even though they don't want what they grew up in, they often end up duplicating the original family system.

Added to this concept is what couples subconsciously believe to be "normal." For example, arguing can be "normal connection" for some. For others, arguing seems traumatic. It is "normal" to avoid any sort of verbal conflict. What's normal for one person might be very upsetting to another person.



## PAST RELATIONSHIPS

Some of the saddest cases for marriage reconciliation is when couples are on their second or third time around and struggling. More often than not, spouses are still working out the hurt and pain from their past painful relationship failures.

It is amazing how often a “2nd time around spouse” has not resolved issues from the first relationship. Also involved, can be an under current of unforgiveness and anger toward that ex-spouse that bleeds into the current relationship.

Couples working out the hurt and pain from a past marriage need to consider doing some personal work to let go of that former relationship in order to move into a healthier place in their present marriage. Sadly there is a great chance of duplicating the failure without some deep grief and healing work.



# REASON FOUR:

## ADDICTIONS OF ANY KIND

There is a cardinal rule in therapy. You cannot counsel someone in marriage if one of the spouses is actively involved in an addiction. This includes one of the parties actively involved in an affair.

We have to address the addiction first because the marriage relationship will never have priority to the addiction. The addiction will demand the main attention and always win over connection in the marriage.

Addictions sabotage progress in marriage counseling if healing for the heart hunger causing the addiction isn't taken care of first.

Addictions have more power in the session than the therapist. Addictions cloud reasoning. Addictions cause lying and steal from the impact of the work in marriage counseling.

Addicted spouses need their own personal healing before marriage issues can be addressed.



# REASON FIVE:

## MAGICAL THINKING

Some marriages have an attitude of “oh well” things will eventually straighten out. “Let’s don’t rock the boat” or “It’s no big deal, this is just the way marriage is.” These attitudes that the marriage will magically right themselves can be silent killers in the marriage relationship.

While there isn’t a lot of conflict in these types of marriage situations there is more of a mediocre, slow death. Denial about the existence of a crisis in the marriage can keep couples from going for help until it is too late.

It can be extremely difficult to move a spouse out of their state of “magical thinking.” Sometimes it takes drastic action by the motivated spouse to “wake up” the other person. This might involve the spouse who realizes the desperate need for change to go through their own healing process.



# REASON SIX:

## MISPLACED PRIORITIES

If the marriage isn't the "main thing" there can't be much movement for the marriage counseling process. For spouses married to their work or their children, it is also hard to motivate them regarding working on the marriage.

Holding other priorities above the marriage might be providing real emotional satisfaction for one party, which gives them a safe place to "live" with their hearts as opposed to the marriage connection.

The inability to see the marriage partner as number one can sabotage the counseling process.

For the spouse motivated to move the marriage to a better place of connection, might again take drastic measures to get the other person's attention. This could be another reason for individual counseling to help one spouse survive being put low on the priority list.





# REASON SEVEN:

# UNFORGIVENESS

Unforgiveness is one of the biggest blocks for moving forward in a marriage. Unfortunately, the whole process is founded on “letting go of past painful events.” Here’s what I think the “moving forward” process looks like:

## FORGIVENESS—-RECONCILIATION—-REBUILD TRUST

There are so many misunderstandings about forgiveness in our culture. Forgiveness has been twisted into a “man-made” soul- event rather than a spiritual process of deep prayer between the person and God. Submitting our pain to the Lord is what begins the forgiveness and healing.

The person who offends us can’t mend the pain of their actions no matter how many times they say they are sorry. They of course should be expected to change behaviors but it is a myth that the person who hurt or betrayed us can take away the pain they caused.

Without forgiveness, reconciliation is impossible. It is the catalyst that will help couples move into new ways of relating and rebuilding trust.

A person mired in unforgiveness is stuck. They probably need help being heard about their pain and also to grieve their losses. This is best done one-one-one and not in the marriage session. This deep work might require time and special individual attention.



# REASON EIGHT:

## MARRIAGE PTSD

*While it might seem like the term “PTSD” is tossed around a lot, it really is “a thing.”*

In today's mixed-up world, there are so many suffering from past painful learning experiences in relationships. More and more I see couples unable to live in relationship because it is bound to expose their vulnerabilities.

Couples can have post traumatic **relationship** stress. Perhaps they haven't been at literal war but definitely they've been involved in relationships that completely sabotaged their abilities to feel safe.

I always have clients take a PTSD evaluation to determine if there needs to be personal work before tackling putting the marriage back together. It is very important to understand the stress a person could be enduring because of their fear and anxiety of being at the mercy of another human being. The pain is real!

On the other end of healing it is great seeing the victory when a person does this personal work.



# REASON NINE:

# NARCISSISM

Unfortunately, our culture has completely been taken over by narcissism. Needless to say, selfishness is at the core of us all. When we are unable to see anyone else's world but our own, our eyesight becomes quite near-sighted.

The entitlement attitude bleeds into so many relationships. Many a person in a relationship suffers from the toxic waste of narcissism. Couples locked in this dynamic are going to have a hard time connecting on any level.

Relationships founded on narcissistic tendencies have little chance of moving toward the self-less servanthood call to love that a Christian marriage exemplifies.

It can often seem hopeless and exhausting when a person is married to a narcissist. For this reason it is good that the person dealing with type of brokenness be informed, build their core strengths up and learn how to do boundaries without guilt. This type of work might be necessary before moving forward in a marriage counseling setting.



# REASON TEN:

## MENTAL BROKENNESS LIKE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER OR ADD

This issue of adult autism spectrum disorder has just recently come to my attention. This concept sheds light on many problems in marriage. For the couple stuck in this paradigm there can be so much disconnection and pain.

Emotional disconnection can many times be caused by ASD or autism spectrum disorder. If one spouse has ASD and the other does not (which is usually the case) their brains are going to be wired completely different and there is going to be considerable pain in the marriage. If you are looking for answers about emotional disconnection it is worth investigating this possibility.

More Information here: Autism and Marriage” (<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/marriage/autism-and-marriage-3-signs-your-spouse-may-be-on-the-autism-spectrum/>) by Stephanie C. Holmes.

In addition, Attention Deficient Disorder is a “real thing” and can really contribute to a couple’s ability to connect. One spouse literally may have a difficult time in the relationship because of their inability to stay focused during emotional connection. Spouses dealing with ADD should seriously pursue professional help. ([www.amenclinics.com](http://www.amenclinics.com))



# WHAT IS THE ANSWER?

There are so many dedicated marriage therapists and counselors. Unfortunately, even professionals are blind-sided by some of the reasons their clients are stuck. If you are struggling in your marriage, perhaps a key component would be to get your own personal help before trying to repair what looks like an impossible situation.

Putting the oxygen mask on yourself might just need the breath of life you need before you try to put the pieces back together in your marriage. If you are discouraged with marriage counseling or even traumatized by the experience, it might be that you are needing a new approach. Getting your own healing first can give you the internal fortitude you need to recover from so many painful learning experiences you've endured either before you were married or in your marriage now.

For Christians, marriage is the example of Christ loving the Church. Is it any wonder there is a spiritual attack on the institution of marriage in our nation? So many couples are discouraged and disillusioned about what was intended to be a blessed experience, connecting on a heart level with their spouse. I believe there is so much opposition out there to destroy hearts and bring disappointment in marriage and subsequent ruining of family heritages.



Used with permission by Storyblocks

There is so much hope for your marriage and there are so many answers but sometimes couples need to *examine their own woundedness* rather than making it a goal to change their spouse.

My expertise as a therapist specializes in helping trauma victims. This is my passion and my the bulk of my training and education.

It was only after I started working with couples from a trauma informed perspective that I started getting some hope for the marriage counseling process. I was saddened to realize how traumatized couples have become in their marriages, but also hopeful for ways to help marriages emerge from the abyss of so many disappointing interactions.

For the marriages with years of past painful learning experiences, or marriages with constant lack of connection and pain even in the early years, it is my personal opinion that coming from a place of trauma resolution is very important for putting the pieces of the relationship back together.

It is from this perspective I am seeing a better plan is to help clients with their individual issues before putting the marriage back together. While couples might be “chomping at the bit” to get out of pain in their marriage by focusing on changing their spouse, it is worth exploring each person’s own personal healing. This step taken by one spouse could be the motivation the other spouse needs to do their own personal work also.

After personal healing, the marriage counseling begins in a place of forgiveness which will accelerate reconciliation and rebuilding trust.





Used with permission of [missingpieces.org](http://missingpieces.org)

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Trudy M. Johnson, PhD, LMFT is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in the states of Colorado (#755), Tennessee(#1182) and Arizona (#15646). She has been in private practice since 2005 and is a Certified Clinical Trauma Specialist(Level 1).

Dr. Trudy has her Doctoral Degree in Biblical Counseling from Master's International School of Divinity and is the founder of [www.anesisretreats.com](http://www.anesisretreats.com).

# **SUMMARY:**

## TEN SUGGESTIONS FOR WHY MARRIAGE COUNSELING DOESN'T WORK:

Waited too long

Hardened hearts

Baggage brought into the marriage

Addictions of any kind

Magical thinking

Misplaced priorities

Unforgiveness

PTSD because of the marriage relationship

Narcissism

Mental brokenness like autism spectrum disorder



# **Are you emotionally divorced?**

Take the evaluation on the next page.

**You shouldn't have more  
than four "yes" answers.**

Little or no eye contact

Lack of sharing on a personal level- surface conversation only

Lack of checking in with each other on a daily basis

Conversations begin harshly

Conversations begin with criticism

Lack of humor in daily interactions

Lack of interest in each others interests

Living separate lives in the same house (sleeping, eating)

Lack of awareness of each others dreams, hopes or personal goals

Apathy about the other persons emotional state

Daydreaming about separate lives

Making decisions about major purchases on your own

No fun in downtimes; Fun times are separate from each other

Have a hard time thinking positively about spouse.

Very few positive recent memories with spouse.

Shutdown at the sound of spouse's voice.

Past memories of spouse seem more like manipulation now.

Body has a visible reaction when in spouse's space.

Struggle feeling safe having sex with spouse.

I can't imagine forgiving my spouse. want my spouse to pay for what they've done.

## Do I Have Autism? A Test for Adults

Awareness of [autism spectrum disorder \(ASD\)](#) has grown dramatically in recent years, which reflects an increase in autism tests and diagnoses — and in the public’s understanding that, even late in life, an autism diagnosis can offer major benefits and relief. Still, symptoms of autism — particularly those previously associated with Aspergers — are still frequently misdiagnosed as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder ([ADHD](#)), mood disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and other related conditions — leading to poor treatment and lifelong challenges. If you recognize yourself or a loved one in the following descriptions of autism spectrum disorder, make an appointment with a health care professional to discuss an evaluation test for autism.

# Are you experiencing Relationship PTSD?

What % of the time represents your experiences during the past week?	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100	
I make it thru the day without distressing thoughts of past painful learning experiences											
I sleep free from nightmares											
I am able to stay in control when I think of difficult memories											
I don't avoid things I used to do (people, social activities)											
I am safe											
I feel safe											
I have supportive relationships in my life											
I can safely feel a full range of emotions											
I can allow things to happen without needing to control them											
I am able to concentrate on thoughts of my choice											
I have a sense of hope about the future.											
<b>ADD SCORES IN COLUMN L TOGETHER AND DIVIDE BY 10 TO CALCULATE TOTAL SCORE</b>											

86 and greater = Mild symptoms  
 75-85 Moderate symptoms  
 74 and less severe symptoms

If any of these suggestions for why marriage counseling might not work just yet for you, it is highly recommended you and your spouse consider your own individual work before you tackle marriage issues.

Looking at the speck in your own eye might help you go into the marriage counseling process with less sensitivity and/or reactivity. You might also have “more room” to forgive your spouses’ transgressions.

[www.anesisretreats.com](http://www.anesisretreats.com)



Used with permission [www.missingpieces.org](http://www.missingpieces.org)