

MARRIAGE REPAIR

restarting your stalled relationship



by Frances Coventry



The wedding bells ring. The bride steps from her gleaming limo. The nervous bridegroom waits at the front of the church.

She walks down the aisle. Their eyes meet. Orchestras play and angels burst into song. This is so right ... so perfect ... so permanent ... But if marriage is about 'two-becoming-one', then marriage breakdown is about that 'one'

coming unstuck and ripping apart at the seams.

Why does this potential heaven-on-earth end up being hell-back-home – an endurance test – and the most painful relationship on earth?

How do lovers become haters – and can that possibly change?

We tracked down David Riddell, a straight-talking counsellor and founder of the Living Wisdom College in Nelson, and asked if he could shed some light on these awfully big questions: Why do relationships go down the tubes? And how can they be fixed?

GRAPEVINE: Can you kick off by telling us what types of people do well in marriage?

DAVID: I prefer to think of it as types of behaviour rather than types of people. The bottom line is, we move towards people who value and respect us – and we move away from people who devalue and disrespect us. So it's not about personality type: it's about ways of relating, which are often trained into us from childhood.

GRAPEVINE: Young people these days are inclined to delay getting married until much later. Is that a good trend or a bad trend?

DAVID: It's a bad trend in my opinion. Their expectations of how wealthy they should be when they marry are often ridiculously high. And they're still looking for the right person – instead of recognizing that it's the skills they bring into the marriage, more than who they marry.

It's like someone who has no mechanical knowledge spending a huge amount of time going from one car sales yard to another, looking for the car that'll never ever break down.

WHERE'S A MECHANIC?

Of course, there's no such thing as a car that'll never break down – but if you have basic mechanical skills, it doesn't matter. Likewise, there's no such thing as a relationship that'll never break down ... but if you have basic relationship skills, you can fix it.

GRAPEVINE: Okay, so is there a right age for marriage?

DAVID: No. The 'age' thing is a popular misconception. For some people, any age is the wrong age because they haven't

learned the basic skills. Others could marry very young and they'd be fine. It's not about age – or even maturity. Two very immature people can marry and marry successfully, providing the respect and care is present.

GRAPEVINE: But how can immature people show respect and care?

DAVID: Well, we're all immature to a degree. We're all in the process of growing up and getting wiser. Most people don't know who they are at 16, so we don't encourage marriages at that age. Yet many of my clients don't know who they are at 50.

The issue is, can you discover who you are in concert with your partner?

You can be an emotional pygmy and still be happily married, provided you make room for your partner to grow – and you don't get defensive or critical and attack them for it.

There is such a thing as incompatibility, but it's far more common to find people who're not learning how to love. Two very, very different people can have a harmonious marriage so long as this respect is present.

GRAPEVINE: Respect: what is it? And how does it work?

DAVID: Respect is giving way. It's the ability to listen and make another person feel heard. It's allowing them to respond and make decisions. It's looking after their interests. Respect is not crowding them or bullying them or manipulating them or abusing them. It's valuing the other person. It's not being defensive or stubborn or stone-walling them.

When I respect you, I listen to you. And I give you a balance of power – I share equally with you.

GRAPEVINE: I notice you talk a lot about respect, but not much about love?

DAVID: That's because love is a fuzzy, loaded term today. People don't know what love is. They tell me: "I love him, but I just can't get on with him!" "I love her, but I don't want to be married to her!"

I never ask a client "Do you love this man?" or "Do you love this woman?" That's a senseless question and it obscures the real issue. You can even love the person that you're divorcing!

A guy says to a girl: "If you really loved me you'd let me have sex with you ..." or "If you loved me you wouldn't talk to me like that ..." But what actually is love? Love involves valuing you. And we need the lifeskills that keep love healthy.

I say show respect – and the love will come naturally. But love without lifeskills can breed deep resentment.

GRAPEVINE: Do you think we focus too much on the wedding these days, rather than a lifetime of actually being married?

DAVID: Oh, for sure. I say to couples who're focusing mainly on the photography and the site and the breakfast and the wedding gown, "Hey guys, you're setting yourselves up for despair if you don't start putting first things first. If you can't communicate with each other, you're not preparing for a good marriage. If you're not dealing with your baggage, all the celebration in the world won't let you paint over the rot."

HARDLY STARTED

I always tell newlyweds, "You've had a wedding – but you don't yet have a marriage." You have a marriage when you've learned how to hear each other, trust each other, negotiate with each other.



GRAPEVINE: Which are things that most couples don't learn before they get married – right?

DAVID: Right. The divorce rate is clear evidence of that!

GRAPEVINE: Ouch! It seems like a case of “Buyer beware!” So give us some of the myths about happy marriages?

DAVID: Oh, there are lots. There's the one we've already touched on: the myth that we shouldn't have a wedding until we can afford it ... until we can have the nicest of everything ... until we've got our own house ... until we've done our big OE ... until we've finished our training.

Falling in love and desiring a person is natural and normal. But to enter into a sexual relationship, then artificially postpone the wedding for another two or three years, that just creates an illusion

of being married. It's an introduction to sexual intimacy that's all about me – not us. And it sets up a pattern of selfishness where it's all about my needs.

There's no ability to postpone gratification or say no to self – and that has bad repercussions in later years.

GRAPEVINE: You're saying that Hollywood's got it all wrong?

DAVID: Well, not entirely. Romance and infatuation are needed. It's good to have a crush – it's good to have that white-hot welding to begin with! But that on its own is just not enough.

A romance can steal a woman's heart and loyalty for the rest of her life. And it can set her up for a life of abuse if she's welded but not treated right.

The thing is, any man can seduce a woman ... and any woman can seduce

a man. It doesn't take lots of brains to seduce someone. What we need are skills of respect to follow it up with. That's where we're lacking.

GRAPEVINE: Perhaps beautiful roses every week are less important than a good honest conversation ...?

DAVID: Sure. I know women who've said to their men: "I hate the roses you buy me because you're doing it as a substitute for listening to me and hearing what I actually want!" Those roses just confirm the fact that her needs are being ignored.

Yes, of course: keeping the romance alive is nice. But if you're hurting each other, no amount of being nice is going to actually fix it.

GRAPEVINE: What do you rate as the biggest causes of marriage failure? And how do they show up?

DAVID: Well, the thin edge of the wedge is when people don't listen or don't take any notice of the other person's protests.

The thick edge of the wedge is when they abuse each other, sexually, emotionally or verbally.

BICYCLE BUILT FOR TWO

A sick marriage is like a tandem bike-ride: one person is up front, steering and directing and enjoying all the power – the other person is down the back pedalling flat out. The view doesn't change much back there, and eventually you get tired of it.

A healthier model for marriage is a man and a woman, each with their own bike, negotiating together which direction they want to go in.

GRAPEVINE: How about sex and money?

They're often named as 'biggies' in relationship conflicts.

DAVID: Yeah, but they're really just symptoms. Symptoms of a lack of balance, or poor mental and emotional health. After all, the health of the relationship is simply a combination of the mental and emotional health of the two people in it.

GRAPEVINE: What happens if there's a lazy partner, who's not prepared to work at it?

DAVID: Well, this is often the case. One person is motivated and has higher expectations than the other. Trouble is, the motivated partner can often go about getting what he or she wants the wrong way: by clamming up, withdrawing and sulking ... or by bullying, dominating and nagging.

Neither approach will lead to change.

It's fine to bring legitimate pressure on your spouse, but first you must grow your own relationship skills. You must learn gentle assertiveness. You must learn to ask questions that go to the heart of the issues. And, most importantly, you must look at how your own emotional bruises cause you to overreact.

I'm often amazed at some of the couples I meet – that they've been able to stay together so long without any of these basic tools.

GRAPEVINE: This lack of lifeskills, these bad patterns of relating – where do they start?

DAVID: With their families, I think. You often see in pre-marriage counselling that a couple have already got these patterns in place. The family is the origin of our relationship habits, and the way you relate to your brothers and sisters, your mother and your father, will indicate to



me whether or not you're going to have a good marriage.

But if a couple can recognize that their marriage may need different skills than the ones they learned from their parents, they have a good chance of success.

GRAPEVINE: So what are the warning signs that a marriage may be in trouble?

DAVID: If two people aren't listening to each other, if they don't believe their complaints are being taken seriously ... that's a warning sign. If their speaking tone is disrespectful. If they're not giving each other personal space. If they're not sharing power – if power is being clutched by one and the other is giving in for the sake of peace.

Someone who's a 'rescuer' may indulge a person who's dominant by nature – until the dominant one becomes an all-out bully, and the rescuer becomes a doormat.

WARNING SIGNS:

How do you know if your marriage is seriously broken? When you lose trust, when you abandon hope that the other person will ever change, when you're no longer motivated to work at it, when you feel nothing but despair – then you know!

By this stage a couple will either resign themselves to some kind of survival pattern, where there's an ongoing cycle of anger and disappointment – or they'll actively seek divorce.

GRAPEVINE: And when that happens, if the marriage breaks up, what becomes of the person who won't change?

DAVID: They generally feel hard-done-by, and play the role of the victim. They use

the children as weapons in a lawyers' fight. They often end up in another bad relationship – which will probably also fail. And so the cycle continues ...

GRAPEVINE: Can a marriage like this be repaired? Should people attempt to cure problems this serious – or just learn how to manage them?

DAVID: I'm all for cure. I mean, if you really manage a problem well, you've cured it! People have to face up to those supposedly unbearable feelings. Because if they can face these realistically, they can be cured.

GRAPEVINE: What do you mean by 'unbearable feelings'?

DAVID: Well, these are the emotional bruises we all have. When somebody presses on one, you'll always give an irrational response. A marriage can survive when there's maybe one bruise each – but if partners have cross-matching bruises, then they'll both become irrational during conflict.

At that point, all adults leave the room and you've got two children fighting.

GRAPEVINE: "You've got to go to counselling!" – that's what people say. But isn't that just more pain?

DAVID: Yes, there's a little more pain, because you have to observe your own reactions. You've got to see that you can't just lash out and blame everybody else. You've got to say: "I'm at fault here!" or "I'm allergic to feeling guilty," or "I won't apologise," or "I can't listen because I'm hurting too much."

But as you begin to see what's really going on, then you begin to hope that this can be fixed.

GRAPEVINE: It takes two to tango, as they say. But is it realistic to suggest: "Hey, you're 80% of the problem, and I'm 20%

– so I'll work on my 20%, and you work on your 80%"?

DAVID: No. You don't put the fox in charge of the chickens! And, for the same reason, you don't ask a warring partner to spell out how responsible they are. Even skilled counsellors can't tell exactly who the major offender is or who's throwing the most fuel on the fire – although most of us have some pretty good instincts after many years of counselling.

IT'S UP TO YOU!

Sometimes I'll tell a person, "You have the key to this situation." They go, "Who? Me?" And I tell them that, with their pattern of victimhood or aggression or their inability to negotiate, they're just going to escalate things every time.

Which may be the first confrontation with reality they've ever had – because they've been building up illusions around themselves since they were children.

GRAPEVINE: Sounds like excuses are not up your alley?

DAVID: No, we're not into blame-shifting. People have to put their hand up and look at how they've contributed. Even if they've married a crazy-maker and are tip-toeing around his or her anger, they still have to say, "I chose this person for needs of my own, for reasons of my own. I'm in this situation by my own choices. Perhaps my parents set me up to fail, but what am I doing to change that? Perhaps my spouse is a person that no one else could live with, but what am I doing about that myself?"

GRAPEVINE: I remember Dr Phil saying that people treat others badly "because



they can” – because they’re allowed to get away with it. Is this the imbalance of power you talk about?

DAVID: Yes. The question is: “Am I playing the role of the victim? Am I pretending to be helpless? Have I given too much power to the other person?”

Women can give too much power away and end up being bullied because they want to be loved and cared for. But that much power is bad for a man. Did you see Jake the Muss in ‘Once Were Warriors’? It just destroys a man’s dignity and gentleness, and it makes him allergic to disappointment – which is very dangerous in a male.

The appropriate response from a woman is gentle assertiveness – where she must push back and affirm her own boundaries and independence.

GRAPEVINE: So men must learn to handle a bit of disappointment?

DAVID: Oh yes, we all do. Being allergic to disappointment is probably right up there amongst the chief causes of marital breakdown.

It’s a huge mistake for parents to protect their children from disappointment – because if it’s not something their brain has built up a tolerance for, they won’t cope with that “no” answer.

GRAPEVINE: How important in marriage repair is telling each other the truth?

DAVID: Well, ultimately the intimacy in a relationship is only as good as the honesty that’s being practiced – and if you’re not practicing honesty you’ll never experience the intimacy that you’re longing for.

GRAPEVINE: Intimacy – that’s another big component, right? The cry from the heart of all of us, at the end of the day. The need to be known ...

DAVID: For sure. A marriage is unfulfilling if you don’t feel known by the other person. That’s why it’s so discouraging in a marriage to feel that your partner doesn’t hear you.

But, of course, if you’re not really honest with yourself, how can you be honest with your spouse?

I have to say that many of the people I work with live in a delusion – and they then have to shape everything else to fit that delusion.

GRAPEVINE: Is this another one of those ‘bad patterns’ that often start during our childhood?

DAVID: Yes, the roots are in our upbringing. If a child has grown to 15 years of age completely oblivious to the fact that most of what he believes about reality is a complete delusion, then it’s my job is to help him trace, face and replace

that delusion – because it’s working against him the whole time.

GRAPEVINE: It’s a hard gig being a parent though, isn’t it?

DAVID: Oh yeah! But there are some very simple tests you can apply to see if you’re cutting it. For example, you can ask yourself:

AM I TEACHING MY KIDS ...

... how to negotiate, how to respect boundaries, how to set boundaries? Am I teaching them the skills of basic respect? If I’m doing those things then I’m going a long way to setting them up for a good relationship.

GRAPEVINE: How about all the social changes we’ve seen over the past 10 or 20 years? Have these helped make our divorce rate so high?

DAVID: Definitely. The self-centredness that’s so prevalent today means it’s now all about ‘me’. But any relationship, if it’s going to survive, depends on care and consideration.

When women didn’t have as many rights as they have today, they were still being (mostly) cared for and looked after – because that was the entire responsibility of the male. Now it’s every man or woman for himself – and this shows up in our divorce statistics, bitter custody battles and matrimonial property battles.

GRAPEVINE: So what’s your forecast for marriage as an institution? Will we see it continue?

DAVID: Marriage equals public commitment. And I often ask couples who are going into de-facto relationships (de-facto being a Latin word for ‘living as married’): “What’s stopping you from admitting it? Why not get married? What are you afraid of?”

I’ve observed that people are de facto for very good reasons. They think marriage equals ‘trapped’ and commitment equals ‘trapped’. They’re afraid they won’t be able to sustain it. Or they’re still experimenting and haven’t drawn conclusions yet.

But I want to ask: “When will the experiment be over?”

GRAPEVINE: So who wins in a de-facto relationship?

DAVID: In most cases it’s not the woman – because she needs commitment if she’s going to feel safe. She needs her man to be there tomorrow. If she falls pregnant she needs to know that she’s not going to end up as a solo mother.

I DO?

Many men are scared of commitment because they don’t believe they have the resources to maintain the commitment – and often they don’t. If you’ve got the lifeskills, you’re not afraid of commitment ... but until you have, you’d do well to fear it!

GRAPEVINE: So let’s get right down to it: is there a formula for marital bliss?

DAVID: Yes, there is, believe it or not. I know it’s not a popular formula but it’s true. I’ve done perhaps 20,000 hours of marriage counselling now and I can tell you that if you have the ability to listen and to hear, to show respect, to value the other person, to negotiate and to be assertive gently and graciously when required ... I can’t see you failing in your relationship.

Marriage isn’t like lotto. It’s not a random idea that God set up, like some lucky dip.

Many parents are now sending their children to me for a pre-marriage counselling session as an engagement present.



And I've been able to remove a lot of baggage from some naïve young people whose marriages would've sunk without that intervention.

Even though I'd never tell a couple that they shouldn't get married, I do sometimes tell them they're not yet ready.

GRAPEVINE: Well, let's say a couple have now reached the stage where it's either make or break: what's the process for getting things healed?

DAVID: If two people are serious about repairing their marriage, it can be repaired – but they're going to have to find a coach or counsellor who can identify the skills they need and show them the way.

I don't believe people in a sick relationship can heal themselves. That's like asking a broken vehicle to get up and go. They need to find a good relationship mechanic.

They may have plenty of love, but they

often don't have the necessary relationship skills. They don't know how to set boundaries, or how to set goals. Some couples don't even plan on the Friday night what they're going to do over the weekend – so they always end up in a fight because they're both disappointed.

GRAPEVINE: Do you think all marriages are salvageable? Or are there situations where a couple should pull the plug?

DAVID: Ultimately, there are some people who're genuinely incompatible – they really are going in different directions. I liken it to a farmer yoking up two bullocks. If one gets mad-cow disease and heads for the cliff, the wise farmer's going to break the yoke and save the other one. He's not going to doom them both in order to save the yoke.

And that's a problem some of us have: we make the yoke more important than the bullock, and we condemn both parties to a bitter and difficult life. There's no mercy in that. There's no wisdom, no intelligence.

So, yes, there is a time to divorce.

But ... divorce is not the quick fix or the easy option. And often it's the beginning of a whole new set of troubles. It's the same problem in a different place, and you either take it with you or you get it resolved.



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