

Dealing with changes in parents' relationship

Question: As I get older and observe my parents' marriage through adult eyes, I am realizing a lot of things bother me about their relationship. They nitpick and fight a lot, and whenever I suggest counseling or outside help, they want nothing to do with it and insist they are perfectly happy. How do I learn to see them as adults and let them make their own choices?

Answer: It is amazing how our perspective on our parents change as we move from being children to being adults. If you are fortunate enough to have parents that provided love and stability in your upbringing and seemed to function well as a couple, you may have seen them as almost perfect. It is normal for many children to idealize their parents and their parents' relationship, especially when you are very young.

Adult relationships change over time and relationships can grow stronger and healthier over the years or they can deteriorate and become less satisfying or less healthy for the people involved. Your parents may have developed new unhappy habits over time (like bickering), or it might be that you just never noticed this part of how they relate to each other before.

It can be especially irritating or sad to be around your parents when you see them relate in ways that seem particularly hurtful or destructive. It sounds like

you are bothered enough by this to suggest that they get help. And, in fact, couple counseling can often help couples overcome these patterns.

There is nothing wrong with wanting your parents to have a happier relationship, but you are right; they are adults, and it is not within your power to convince them that they could benefit from counseling. While they may not be "perfectly happy with each other," the risk of trying to change things is clearly scarier than the comfort of putting up with their own foibles. Your choices are to make decisions for yourself in relation to their behavior.

Can you see the humor in the situation and not take their bickering too seriously? Do you need to spend less time around them when they are together? You have lots of choices. The only person you can really change, of course, is you.

Question: Is the saying once a cheater, always a cheater, true? Why do people cheat? Is it because they don't want to be with their partner or are there other underlying reasons? My husband cheated on me before we were married, but since then he has been devoted to me ... at least

physically. The problem is that I see him looking at other girls even when I'm around, and although I know that is natural, it makes me wonder if he'd rather be with someone else. Every aspect of our marriage is

great, but I just worry. **Answer:** Your question contains a lot of different questions. I will try to address some of them. People in a committed relationship begin hidden, secretive relationships or have purely sexual encounters with other people for a number of reasons. Frustration and dissatisfaction with their committed partner may be part of the reason but is usually not the main cause.

Other reasons people cheat include the desire for newness and excitement, a chance meeting with an attractive sexually or emotionally available person, or an internal, personal crisis within the person that leads them to act in a way that is not characteristic for them. There are also some people who have problems with being sexually compulsive or dishonest across many life areas and who really don't care about how their

choices affect other people. Whether your husband is likely to ever cheat again depends a lot on what the reasons were for his previous affair and whether he has learned better, more honest ways to cope.

The second problem you mentioned is that he often looks at other women, even when he is with you in public situations and this makes you feel insecure and nervous. While it is natural for both women and men to appreciate other people for their attractiveness or beauty, there is more than one way to handle those feelings.

Some women are not bothered by this behavior, but many are. Given your history with your husband, it makes sense that this behavior would "push your buttons" emotionally. If you are uncomfortable with the amount of attention he pays to other women when you are together, speak up (in a private setting, like home) and let him know clearly how you feel. If he keeps doing it after you ask him not to, his behavior is hurtful and inconsiderate. You might consider going to a marriage counselor to see if the two of you can resolve this conflict.

HAVE A QUESTION FOR DR. BETH FIRESTEIN?

Email your questions to her at firewom@webaccess.net.



UNCOMMON SENSE WITH BETH FIRESTEIN

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