



## **The Necessary Changes if You Want to Stop Destructive Behavior** **Leslie Vernick DCSW,LCSW**

I'm delighted that you've taken your wife's suggestion and opened this article. What you learn here will help you to become a better husband. Many of us grow up not learning how to have healthy relationships, express our feelings, or resolve conflict. Marriage is hard work, even when you love someone. For your marriage to get back on track, you will need to develop some new attitudes about marriage and women, learn some new skills, and make consistent efforts to rebuild trust.

Sometimes, when we hear feedback that we're not doing well we get defensive and shamed. Instead of listening and learning, we want to strike back at the truth teller and start blaming and accusing them of their faults.

If your wife has told you that she cannot live with your destructive behaviors any longer I know you're hurt and angry. But understand that she is speaking hard truth to help your marriage not to hurt your ego. Yes, it does hurt your ego to hear hard truth just like it hurts to get surgery to take out a cancerous tumor but you accept that it's part of the healing process.

In my experience you will not be able to make all these changes without some outside help and support. It's just too easy to slip back into your old habits and right now it's absolutely essential that you not do that. It's too destructive to you, to your wife and to your marriage.

It would greatly bless your wife to know that you are serious about becoming a better man. That you want to grow, to learn to love her and your children in a life-affirming way. I will help you get started but please, it's crucial that you reach out to your pastor, a Christian counselor or coach who is familiar with these issues and some godly men who can walk along side of you in this journey.

Here are the words from one man I've been working with on how important his church family is in his healing journey.

He writes:

*David sat across from me, silent, as I continued to stare at the keys on the conference table. I can't recall anything in particular I was thinking at the time; I'm not even sure I was*

*thinking at all. He had just urged me to use his guest house, which he maintains for family and friends and for missionaries on furlough. Later, David would tell me that I sat staring at the keys for forty-two minutes. Thus began my two weeks out of the house after I had committed an incident of abuse—not the only one in my history, but perhaps the proverbial straw on the camel’s back—that left my wife more desperate and fearful than ever before.*

*Those forty-two minutes, when David sat with me without words, patiently loving me, are perhaps a snapshot in time of how he—and my church—have walked with me and my family over the last several years. David has been both gentle and patient, stern and urgent, as he has alternately encouraged me, admonished me, rebuked me, and exhorted me. Always with Christ’s fierce strength, always pointing me back to Christ.*

*Over the last year or so, David has also been coming with me to my counseling sessions with Leslie. Extraordinary? I’m sure it is. But I believe that his presence in these sessions has been invaluable. Sometimes when I say something to Leslie, David is able to say “Actually, do you remember...” to help me frame reality. At other times, he can say “As Leslie just said...” or “In addition to what Leslie just said...” better to inform or to nuance her counsel. And when David and I meet weekly and I start drifting again, he can often say, “Do you remember what Leslie said the last time about that?”*

*I wish I could say that all this is now history, but it’s not. I’m not where I was, but I’m not where I’d like to be. My family is not where it was, but it’s not where I’d like it to be. I do know that without David, my extraordinary friend and elder, shepherding me with the authority of my church and walking beside me, we would not be where we are. I shudder to think where we might be. I also know that my time with Leslie will come to an end at some point in time. But David and our church will continue to love me and my family long after that time. And God willing, we will pay it forward with others who wouldn’t make it alone.*

This man is not done learning, growing and changing. His marriage is not all better yet even though he’s been at it for some time. Sometimes we can know how something’s supposed to be in our head, but we still can’t do it. We know we should eat more fruits and vegetables for a healthier life but we still are drawn to beer and pizza. We know we should save more money for retirement, but somehow, we always have an excuse as to why we need to spend it now.

In the same way, we know we shouldn’t say everything we feel in a moment of anger but it still flies out of our mouth when we’re ticked off. And, then we excuse it or justify it because our spouse, or our child, or the pokey driver in front of us made us mad.

Do you hear the craziness in that kind of thinking? That somehow someone else is responsible for your emotions and behaviors? When Moses lost his temper at the Israelites, who did God hold accountable? Yes, Moses, even though the Israelites clearly provoked him. Jesus says when we’re provoked, what comes out of our mouth is from our own heart (Luke 6:46,47).

You will never have a perfect wife, a perfect marriage, a perfect drive to work or a perfect life. Things will irritate you, frustrate you, anger you. But do you know how to deal with those emotions in a healthy way? In a way that doesn't cost you the things you value the most?

If not, then you have some things to learn. Remember, learning takes a consistent effort and practice OVER time to make a lasting change. You don't learn how to golf, or play guitar overnight and you won't learn how to be a better spouse in a day, but you can learn. Journaling is something you can do to get started.

Journaling is an important tool you will need to be self-aware and self-reflective so that you are capable of being self-corrective when your behaviors or attitudes are less than loving. It's important to journal the answers to these questions each night – reflecting upon your day.

1. **How did my body feel today?** Tense? Relaxed? Stressed? Tired? Irritable? Hungry? Anxious? What are your body's signals that you are getting worked up? Headache? Irritable bowel? Pain in your neck? Clenched fists? Are you able to put into words the sensations you are having in your body? If not, note that: You need some help in learning how to understand your body's internal warning system as well as how to express your feelings.
2. **How did I treat people, particularly my spouse, children or those closest to me today?** Were you respectful? Detached? Engaged? Loving? Deceitful? Abusive? Rude? Manipulative? Sarcastic? Shaming? If you treated someone sinfully, did you take responsibility or blame-shift? Did you apologize? Make amends? If not, why not?
3. **Were your actions today in line with the person you say you want to be?** For example if you've said you want to be a loving husband or a godly man, did you behave that way? If you indicate you want to be a man of integrity, were you honest today? If you want to be a man with a pure heart, were you lustful today? If you want to learn to be a good listener, did you listen well? If want to be a good steward of your body, did you stick to your diet? Drink too much alcohol? Do other things with your body that you don't want people to know?

It's important that you learn to live from the person you are and want to be rather than reacting from your strong emotions or negative thoughts. This takes time and practice to learn to not allow our emotions or negative thoughts have the upper hand. Most people need some help in learning how to do that. It's not a bad thing to ask for help and support. If you wanted to learn how to golf better or wanted to run a marathon, you'd give yourself time to learn, you'd practice, and if you got stuck, you'd seek help from a coach or a person who knows how to help you get where you want to go (if you truly wanted to reach that goal). Invest in your marriage in the same way.

4. **In what non-sexual ways did you show your wife or children that they are important to me and you care about them today? Even if you're currently separated from your wife you can answer this question.** Did you help her with the children? Call or text her from work to let you know you were thinking about her? Stop and pick up something at the grocery store without complaining? Give her a non-sexual hug or kiss with no expectations for later? Bring home flowers?

Daily asking yourself these four questions and answering them will help you start to notice unhealthy patterns and ways you becomes triggered to react in negative ways. Writing your thoughts and feelings out helps you find words to express what's inside and it helps you see where your thinking may be unrealistic, entitled, and self-centered.

Learning to examine yourself and reflect upon your thoughts, feelings and behaviors keeps you mindful that you are not all better yet, things are not fine just because your wife is acting nice again. It helps you see that you still have a long way to go if you want your marriage to truly heal.

Try to be compassionate towards yourself when you see you're not there yet. Remind yourself that it's good to see where you still fall short so you don't think you have it all together, stop growing and revert back to your old ways.

If you'd like more help in learning how to manage your negative emotions read my books, *How to Live Right When Your Life Goes Wrong*, *How to Act Right When Your Spouse Acts Wrong* and *Lord, I Just Want to be Happy*.