

American Journal of **Family Law**

VOLUME 29 NUMBER 2 SUMMER 2015

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How and Why to Try Reconciliation

MARK CHINN

Editor's Note: Readers are invited to respond with their views on this important subject.

As a divorce lawyer over the last 33 years, I frequently have been confronted with clients who wish to reconcile, even when a spouse has been guilty of considerable marital fault. Reconciling carries with it legal considerations—particularly in fault states—that must be considered with a lawyer. When the decision is made to pursue reconciliation, however, there are certain things to consider and certain tools to use to make the reconciliation effective.

(1) Why Try to Reconcile?

There are many reasons to try and reconcile. First, people usually make huge investments in their marriage relationship, and it is a shame to lose that investment. Some people may have invested their entire adult lives and do not wish to see the investment branded as a failure. Others have children they want to raise in a two-parent home. Others have moral, spiritual, or other values that compel them to try everything possible to save the marriage. As long as you consider the possible consequences of a failed reconciliation, there

is a lot to be said for knowing that you did everything you could to save the marriage before you relented to divorce.

(2) Forgiveness.

Reconciliation is not possible without practicing forgiveness. I once had a client who desperately wanted to save her marriage to her philandering doctor husband. Unfortunately, she could not keep from being sarcastic about his girlfriends from time to time. Her sarcasm alienated her husband. His attitude was, "What's the use?!" She would call me and say, "Well, I did it again." Finally, her husband gave up and left for good. Forgiveness benefits the person who forgives because it saves the person from living with the venom. Without it, reconciliation is not possible.

(3) Counseling.

Reconciliation requires expert help. We recommend that three counselors be employed, one for

each spouse and one for the marriage. People often complain this is a waste of money. But, the real question is, how much is saving your marriage worth? Each person needs a counselor who is in his or her corner. The marriage needs a counselor whose objective is to save marriage.

(4) Separation. We recommend parties separate for six months while they are trying to rebuild their relationship. They should

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refrain from having sexual intercourse and should, of course, refrain from seeing or communicating with any other person who might interfere with the marriage. I find that people who try to reconcile while living in the same environment that created the trouble are running down the same rat maze to find no cheese. Getting back together might feel good for about two weeks, but then the luster wears off and there is a split again, and this time, it's for good.

- (5) **Reading.** People who are reconciling should read everything they can on how to save a relationship. There are many books on the subject and many articles on line. This will arm each person with knowledge and perhaps some tools to rekindle the romance.

- (6) **Worship Together.** When people are having trouble in

their lives, it never hurts to turn their attention to their spiritual beliefs. The worship center also provides a community of support.

- (7) **Make Marriage the Number One Priority.** I had a businessman in my office once who was complaining that he was failing at his marriage. I couldn't quite detect what was wrong. He was very successful in business, and he did not have any particular complaints. I asked him if he gave as much attention to his marriage as his business. He sheepishly replied that he did not. I asked him if he woke up thinking about his business, planned his day around his business, and went to sleep and dreamed about his business. He said "yes." I asked him if he thought if he gave that much attention to his marriage if it would be a success too. He sheepishly replied, "Probably so."

- (8) **Make Changes.** I have had many spouses in my office who complain that their spouse wants a divorce because they won't make certain changes, such as drinking less. When I ask why they won't make the change, they often become defiant and ask, "Why should I have to do that? She should accept me for who I am." I ask them if they recall when they were courting their spouse if they were willing to do whatever it took to get them to marry them. They usually reply, "yes." I ask, then, "Why are you unwilling to court your spouse to save a marriage when you were willing to court to start it?" It always surprises me how unreceptive people are to this advice and logic. But, I fully believe that being willing to change is a necessary ingredient of any successful, long-term relationship.