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Can you save your marriage in a weekend?

Friday: Marriage in crisis. Saturday: Attend couples workshops. Sunday: Back in love *By Anne Bokma*

Bill and Marlene Palmer were miserable in their marriage. Years of resentment and bitterness had built to the point where the couple could barely stand one another. Marlene was frustrated by Bill's inability to share his feelings and his lack of effort in making her feel special. Bill, in turn, was sick of Marlene's nagging and criticism. Sex had dwindled to once every few months. "I had gone for years without any sort of emotional connection with him, and we just lived on the surface," says Marlene. "Everything he said grated on my nerves. As a result, there was always judgment — I felt he neglected me, and in return I demeaned him." The only thing holding them together was their three sons. But even that parenting bond risked being ripped apart when Marlene discovered Bill was having an affair. Divorce seemed inevitable.

As a last-ditch effort to salvage their marriage, the Palmers (whose names have been changed) signed up for a marriage retreat with Grace Cirocco, a relationship coach based in St. Catharines, Ont., who has led more than 1,000 couples through her Relationship Renewal Retreat. She says her retreat is the equivalent of 12 months of traditional marriage counselling, and claims an 80 percent success rate at keeping couples together.

The Palmers are one of her success stories. Four years after attending Cirocco's retreat, the Toronto couple, who were both raised in the United Church and are in their mid-40s, have learned more about themselves and each other. Marlene says their marriage is happier than ever.

"Bill was raised in a family where they never shared their feelings. One of the best things about the retreat was that he saw other men moved to tears because they wanted to save their marriages too," says Marlene. "It broke down a wall with my husband, and he realized that sharing your emotions isn't something you do because your wife wants you to. It's something you do for the health of your marriage."

As a result of the retreat, the couple made a lot of changes in their life together: they now greet each other with a hug at the door at the end of the workday; they always go to bed together at the same time; they eat dinner as a family most nights of the week; they make time for "pillow talk" every single day; and they go on regular dates, even if they aren't fancy. "I used to do the groceries every week by myself. Now Bill always comes with me, and it's something we do together," Marlene says. Their emotional intimacy has also boosted their physical intimacy. "We came close to losing everything," she reflects. "Every couple should go on a retreat like this because nobody teaches you how to be happily married for a long time."

Cirocco uses what she calls an “emotional healing process” to help couples get back on track. It’s only by trudging through the muck of marriage — “the huge black swamp where couples make deposits over the years” — that partners can work through their negative emotions so their relationship can resemble “a flowing stream that runs smoothly.” She leads groups of up to 10 couples in activities designed to do this. One exercise, called “peeling the onion,” involves sitting face to face, making direct eye contact and talking for 15 minutes without interruption about what each wants from the relationship, what they are afraid of and any hurts they have received from their partner. For many participants, it’s the first time they feel they’ve really been heard.

You don’t need to be facing a crisis such as an affair in order to inject new life into sagging spousal relations. Midlife marriage malaise could be just as threatening — people over 50 represent the only age group in which divorce is on the rise, according to Statistics Canada. “For a lot of couples, 25 years is usually the danger point,” says Cirocco. “That’s when the kids are gone and people find themselves in the house with a stranger, and they have no idea how to connect.” Long-term marriages often face a host of stressors — an empty nest, lack of sex, job loss, retirement, caring for aging parents, deferred dreams and entrenched habits — that can drain the fuel from a partnership that once ran in high gear. Getting away for a couple of days to work on your marriage might be the best way to fill the tank for your remaining years together.

When Sharlene Gibson and her partner, Katherine Hamilton, hit the 25-year mark in their relationship, the couple signed up for a marriage retreat offered by Calgary psychotherapist Diane Monteith last May at the Naramata Centre, a United Church education and retreat facility in British Columbia’s Okanagan Valley. The couple, who attend Deer Park United in Calgary, needed to work on “the bloody irritants of daily life,” Gibson says with a laugh, noting these irritants increased significantly once they became parents to two children, one of whom has special needs.

“I want to hold this marriage together and be good role models to our kids,” says Gibson. “Going on a retreat like this is all about taking a risk to be vulnerable and cracking open your heart a little.” The retreat helped them realize they sometimes feel resentful toward each other because they don’t effectively communicate their expectations. For example, when Hamilton would come home from her job as an accountant and immediately pop open her laptop, Gibson, a stay-at-home mom training to be a chaplain, would feel half-listened to. “Then I’d be pissed off and ignore her. The mood in the house would be negative, and the kids would pick up on that.” Conversely, when Gibson would jump in and correct Hamilton when she was dealing with the children, Hamilton would feel undermined. “I was acting as if I was the authority, instead of

allowing Katherine to also be a mom,” says Gibson. “And I didn’t know that was bugging her.”

The retreat gave them both an opportunity to address these issues. “Now we are trying harder to be more discerning in what we want our family life to look like,” says Gibson. The couple has already signed up for Monteith’s next workshop at Naramata this October, “The Secret World of Mid-Life Couples.” Monteith says her goal is to help couples address unresolved issues that have often been stewing for years. “There’s a tendency to want to blame your partner and to start bickering and acting out. If you don’t have good communication skills and haven’t learned how to reconcile the hurts and wounds, you are going to get stuck.”

You’ve heard it before — marriage takes work. It’s a truism that guides the practice of Louise Dorfman and David Rubinstein, two psychotherapists who have been married to each other for 41 years and run private one-on-one “couple enrichment” retreats at their country property in Orangeville, Ont. Love, they say, is a “dynamic activity, rather than an idyllic, passive state that lasts forever.” And, as with any art form, love can be mastered with ongoing learning and dedicated practice. “It’s all about attention and dedication,” says Rubinstein. “We are dedicated to things like our work and our children, and we need to build on the idea of being dedicated in the same way to our relationship. Many people don’t really understand what it means to be a couple and take care of each other.”

Dorfman says a lack of emotional intimacy is at the root of most of the marriage problems they see. But once couples learn to open up and be vulnerable with each other, everything else often falls into place — they fight less and have sex more. “We’ve had couples here who haven’t had sex in 10 years, and by the second night of the retreat, they are once again able to open their hearts to each other,” she says. “Emotional intimacy is the doorway that gets them there.”

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