

# The marriage menders

Struggling marriages can often be saved from divorce by taking the practical approach, say one couple. They tell **Linda Strange** how they help rescue relationships

**It is amazing how many couples haven't had a proper conversation with each other for years," said Penny Raby,**

She's met quite a few of them herself. By the time they reach Penny's office, they are almost always considering divorce.

She is a senior solicitor who has handled countless matrimonial cases in her thirty-year career.

But she believes many of those marriages could have been saved if the couples had been helped to communicate with each other.

With this in mind, Penny and her husband, chartered accountant Mike Gordon, have set up Marriage Makeover, which they describe as finding practical solutions to rescuing relationships, "based on sound business, financial and lifestyle thinking".

"So many people seem to drift apart because of the speed at which we live," said Penny. "People get up at six o'clock in the morning, they leave the house, or they are staying home with two or three children, and they don't stop

what they are doing until they see each other with their TV dinner in front of the telly and then fall asleep later on. This goes on day after day and you forget why you got together in the first place.

"People drift apart and they tend to make presumptions about the other person's life – such as the entrepreneur who is trying to juggle all the balls in the business and has to work incredible hours to keep the cash flow going, the wife doesn't understand all that work needs to be done and doesn't understand just how close to the edge the business is; how much debt there is; how hard you have to work to keep it going.

"She thinks he is being unreasonable because he isn't spending time at home or with the children; she starts to presume things which may have been put into her mind by third parties – he must be having an affair. It spirals out of control and before you know, it is heading for divorce when, in fact, there was never anything going on in the first place."

Other marriage flashpoints they come across include the inability of husbands to accept a high-earning wife, particularly where her career has come late and possibly eclipsed his. And other triggers are retirement, redundancy, sudden cash windfalls – in fact most life-changing experiences.

"The resulting difficulties leave them feeling divorce is the only option," said Penny. Their approach of talking through the facts first and dealing with the emotional side second sounds a bit clinical, I venture, on meeting the couple at their Worcestershire home. Shouldn't there be a marriage guidance counsellor in there somewhere?

"Relate does a fantastic job, but what we offer

is a different service which is particularly for people who have complicated financial and business lives," said Penny.

"They'll have significant assets such as shares, equity, pensions, savings etc, and from a financial point of view, they've much more to lose than the average person if they are faced with divorce.

"They then realise – 'Oh, that really is all the money there is – if we divide it, our lifestyle and the business can't continue'."

"They are then asked, almost immediately, to make an emotional decision about what they want to do next. That is too much for some people. They need time to go away and assimilate all those facts and have that emotional reaction to change their point of view. It happens a lot."

In cases where more specialist help is needed, such as emotional counselling, Penny and Mike have a network of experts they can call on.

The trauma of divorce is something the couple can speak of with personal experience – they have both been divorced themselves. Later, both single, they met at a party Mike was holding on Valentine's day and conducted a long-distance relationship



Penny Raby and Mike Gordon: a practical approach to saving marriages.

## Keeping a marriage on the right tracks

Penny and Mike believe there are common themes within struggling marriages and have compiled their top ten tips for keeping a marriage on the right tracks.

- 1 Accept that change happens. Neither time nor people stand still. If you want something to change, then change something. If your relationship is flagging, you have to do something to renew it.
- 2 Be honest. Sometimes you have to be cruel to be kind. If you really have fallen out of love with someone, tell them. Don't prolong the agony or raise expectations falsely.
- 3 Talk about the tough stuff. Facing up to sensitive problems is half the challenge – you can then talk and deal with them.
- 4 Play together, stay together. Set aside some fun, quality time for yourselves together. Make sure your marriage is your most important project, not mundane tasks like DIY.
- 5 Only the two of you really understand your relationship. The

support of other people can be helpful, but try not to be consumed by their opinions, advice and suggestions.

- 6 Continue the courtship. Try to remember the reasons you were attracted to each other in the first place.
- 7 Have a shared goal to work towards. Focus on what you can achieve as a team rather than as individuals – it reminds you of the power of togetherness.
- 8 Negotiate the money rationally. If you're able to agree a reasonable approach to money, it can save a lot of underlying tension within the relationship.
- 9 Let go of resentment. It's easier said than done, but it's absolutely crucial to find a way of moving on from issues that have affected your past.
- 10 Argue well. Arguments are part of every relationship, so turn them into a positive lesson in communication. Agree to disagree and realise there doesn't need to be a 'winner' at the end of every discussion.

figures here and my wife understands where I am coming from, I can't have this discussion."

"This is where I can sit in the middle and interpret, particularly the business and financial issues, for both parties," said Mike.

"One of the reasons that we like to talk about the facts first is because our experience in divorce cases is that people's attitudes change when they know what the reality is."

Penny chimed in: "Many people don't realise the full financial implications of divorce until they are literally at the steps of the court, going for trial."

The average divorce in the UK costs £28,000\*, and a settlement may pay out much less than the couple are expecting.

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between the Midlands and Yorkshire until they married 13 years ago.

The couple point out that during the whole of those years of handling divorce cases, they have had only five couples go before a judge for a full trial. Most of their work involves settlement and disclosure issues.

"We often find that when the pressures are off, and the settlement made, the pair often find they get on quite well together!"

This practical couple urge people to take a look at their marriage as if it were a business.

"It might sound callous, but it often works," said Penny. "If you could see a cash flow problem in your business a few months down the line, you'd do something about it. It should be the same in a marriage."

"Couples should ask themselves – where do you want to be in five years' time? It doesn't just happen, you plan it and make it happen together."

"You have to communicate but you need to realise you have to discuss the tough stuff – things like what you spend your money on; how many hours you want to work and why – you can't make presumptions. People come from two completely different families and lifestyles and may presume their partner lives the same life in their head as they do – they don't."

\* Marriage Makeover gives presentations to network groups and business forums. For details, call 01386 555114.

\* Norwich Union survey, December 2006

Couples are urged to take a look at their marriage as if it were a business

PEOPLE