

## Lessons about Marriage from the Government Shutdown

The dysfunctional relationship of congress and the Administration is a pretty good example of what happens to marriages before the end.

1. **Both sides are dug in to their positions and believe they are right and the other party is wrong.** Each spouse is a unique being who's view of what is happening is shaped by their early experiences in life and by the history of their relationships. Some have estimated couples have as many as twenty one disagreements a week. The more each believes they are right and the other person is wrong the more entrenched they each become in their position and the less likely they are to be open to see it from the other person's point of view.
2. **Both sides are talking bad about the other to third parties who don't have the relationship's best interest at heart.** Too frequently the advice couples seek for help is from their best friends. Friends are rarely supportive first of the relationship. Their support is of the friend. Their advise is supportive of the individual who is complaining about their spouse and not supportive of how to move through the issue for resolution. Just like the media, friends seem to benefit most when the couple is fighting. Some of the worst relationship advice comes from the mouths of our friends.
3. **Both sides are creating more polarization by vilifying each other's side.** When a couple moves the conversation away from the behavior change each wants and begins attaching the character and motives of the other person, we move from working toward resolution to causing pain in each other's hearts. Calling each other names and telling the other person how bad they are may feel good in the moment but it never results in resolution of the issue and frequently causes more damage than the original issue being discussed.
4. **Innocent dependents are being harmed.** Being raised in a home where constant tension and verbal aggression or intimate partner violence occurs is not good for child outcomes. On the same par, divorce has significant negative implications for children. It is not the child's fault the relationship is so bad but they frequently believe that they were part of the cause of the problem and usually fantasize about the feud being resolved and mom and dad living together peacefully.
5. **Without change, the future appears to have each party on separate parallel tracks.** When there is gridlock in the marriage, the issue remains unresolved and couples frequently disengage from each other and begin to live parallel lives in the same home. The outcome over time can result in the symptoms of this problem, such as infidelity and financial distrust.

So what can be done with a damaged relationship that appears to be at a stalemate with the pain of gridlock? Here are some specific things that can be done no matter what stage of gridlock you are in:

1. **Listen!** There are reasons behind the difference of opinion. Usually we cannot hear our spouse's position because we are so focused on converting them to our position that we do not hear the reasonable request within their position. Stephen Covey is attributed with the saying, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." We cannot do that when we are triggered emotionally. So find a mutually safe place and listen to each other.
2. **Talk to each other instead of about each other!** If couples would spend the same amount of time and energy working toward solution as they do telling their friends and relatives how bad their spouse is, they would come to a resolution much faster. Instead of seeking relationship advice from friends who will rarely not take your side, talk to a professional counselor, Pastor, or veteran married couple. Have the third party help you talk to each other!
3. **Focus on what you want!** Couples usually argue more about how they disagree than what they disagree about. So be specific about the behavior change you are requesting. What do you want your spouse to do more of or do less of? How can you support them in doing it? What can you do to set up things so that you take more responsibility for the behavior you want or do not want? Be specific and make the ask of the behavior change you most desire.
4. **Stay motivated to end gridlock.** I believe children are precious gifts from God. Do your part to create the environment that is best for their upbringing my staying motivated to fight for your marriage. How committed are you? What are you willing to do to create the kind of marriage you want for yourself?
5. **Get Help!** As someone who has spend his professional career of a couple of decades helping keep families and marriages together, I have seen couples whose marriage died 20 years earlier but they are still living in the same house. Both are miserable but are hanging on for various familial , social or economic reasons. I think of it as if something died many years ago but instead of burying it, they kept it around to stink up their home and their lives.

I do not have advice for our politicians. But as long as they are not talking to each other, I do not see a resolution in our future. Someone has to have the courage and act first. One party, not both, must take the first step in moving toward a listening opportunity. I have witnessed the same in couples: one person can make the difference and save the marriage by taking a courageous first move toward resolution.

Over the past five years, Shield Bearer has developed its own model intervention for marriages living in gridlock and shutdown. The Shield Bearer Marriage Intensive is

a full day of “intense” couples counseling all in one day. It’s a couple and a therapist (or two) working through a process focused on bringing healing, finding hope and moving toward a new future together. Unlike traditional counseling (a couple of hours a week with several months of counseling) with a success rate of around 50%, the Shield Bearer Marriage Intensive results have a success rate after over fifty couples of over 90%. You can learn more at 281-894-7222 or at [www.fightingforhearts.org](http://www.fightingforhearts.org).

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Roy Wooten, Executive Director of Shield Bearer Counseling Center, is one of the "real life" football players that the movie Friday Night Lights was based upon, but he is best known for helping thousands of people improve their relationships through humorous, transformational and inspirational retreats, seminars and workshops. On weekends he is usually found preaching in a church or facilitating a weekend retreat.