



How Would You Meet These Family Crises?



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FAMILY PROBLEMS, at least their visibility and intensity, have reached an unprecedented peak in America. Reports from our 312 member agencies show a persistent increase in the number of couples seeking help.

I believe that behind this lies a greater intensity in the crises facing families today. Yet marriage counselors have observed an interesting phenomenon: many couples who divorce have had happier marriages than some who remain married. Moreover, those who stayed together evidently survived conflicts far more acute than those experienced by couples who accepted defeat through divorce or separation.

How do you react to a crucial situation in your marriage? When a point of strain is reached, can you and your spouse face up to it—and make the hurdle back to harmony? The trouble may start as only a small "brush fire," but if allowed to spread it can reduce your marriage to ashes.

From the files of our Family Agencies I have selected seven actual case histories to illustrate some major critical predicaments confronting average couples. In each instance, the problem is presented in capsule form, then the suggested solution, also in abbreviated form. These may help you gain insight into difficulties of your own. (The names used here are fictitious to avoid embarrassment to the actual families.)

1. In-law trouble. Married 14 years, Jim and Ann Parrish were well-suited to each other and shared many interests. Last summer, Jim's

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mother, who was convalescing from an illness, came to visit them—and stayed on week after week. She ordered the Parrishes' two children around and expected her son to give her constant attention. Ann finally exploded: "Jim, you've got to choose between me and your mother!"

What they did: At a Family Agency, a caseworker interviewed Jim and Ann separately, then together. Ann came to understand she was placing Jim in an impossible situation. Jim, in turn, realized that Ann needed more reassurance of his affection so she would be better able to share him with his mother. Jim's mother, who was in need of special care, was placed in a nearby nursing home where they could visit her frequently and she could spend weekends with them. This plan restored equilibrium to their household.

2. Money conflict. Bill Tolbert, a 29-year-old engineer, was an impulsive overspender. Even though his income had doubled in the past five years, he and his wife Betty were in danger of losing their home. Yet he saw nothing wrong and insisted he could take care of his family's finances. Bitter, frustrated, and anxious, Betty finally told Bill that, if their financial mess didn't

clear up soon, she would leave him.

How it worked out: Through discussions with a counselor, Bill perceived that his irresponsible spending seemed to reflect an urge to rebel against his wife and to encourage her to complain and to control the family. Betty, who became aware that she had a habit of belittling her husband, made efforts to change her own attitude. Each saw some of the roots of the difficulty, of which money was only a symptom. A plan for debt management was set up which meant the family would live stringently for three years. As Bill settled down to follow the plan, they became closer to each other and found themselves spending more hours having a good time with the children rather than in bickering over money.

3. The new baby. Young Joe Manson had been intensely unhappy ever since his first baby arrived six months earlier. "I'm crazy about my wife," he confided to a friend, "but I don't seem to rate with her since we've had the baby."

Before they became parents, Saturday night was the Mansons' "big night" out with their crowd. Then came a Saturday when Diana refused to leave the baby with a sitter. "The baby's cranky, and a sitter would just cause her to cry more," Diana insisted.

"I'm tired of staying home watching tv every Saturday night," Joe retorted. "It's either the baby or me!" And he stormed out.

The answer: At the office of a Family Agency, it finally dawned on Diana that her husband also needed affection and attention—that the child should not monopolize all her time. To share the baby, Joe was encouraged to help care for her

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