

AMBIVALENCE—SHOULD I STAY, OR SHOULD I GO?

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“...but I *love* him,” cried Susan, agonizing about her dilemma. “I’m miserable in my relationship. I don’t know what to do. I’m stuck.” To many onlookers--friends, family--the answer is simple: “Just leave him.” But resolution is far from simple. As a psychotherapist in private practice, I find this heart-wrenching story is an all-too-familiar one.

Ambivalence—the uncertainty of decision-making in a troubled relationship: feeling trapped, paralyzed, torn.

Life Certainties

- Women (and men) are alike. We all want and need love.
- No one wants to be alone.
- You are not alone in your confusion and pain. Other women are suffering, too.
- There are no rights or wrongs. Friends and family listen patiently and offer suggestions, but they don’t live inside of your relationship. The choice is yours.

Susan’s Story

A self-employed, intelligent, attractive woman in her early 40’s, and never married, Susan had been seeing John off and on for four years. They would seem happy, but something always happened: John lost his job or started seeing another woman, or Susan got a lucrative work contract. Suddenly he would walk out, not returning for months. Susan was heartbroken and disillusioned, but each time, she took him back. She was the consummate caretaker, and it felt good to be needed. He gave her reason to avoid friends, family, activities for herself--she had to be there for John. However, by the time Susan, anxious and sleep-deprived, arrived for therapy, she had “had it.”

We worked on a plan to cut off contact with John: not respond if he called or e-mailed, not see him. She valiantly tried, but passion trumped logic. Another realization: Love can feel

like a drug. We want the high, in spite of the negative consequences. That intense feeling keeps people hooked.

We considered her family history and saw similarities to her current situation. Susan, the oldest of three daughters, was relied on to be strong and dutiful. Wanting love, she put her own needs last. Susan watched and learned from her mother: She kept her feelings to herself, did not feel entitled to express them and had low expectations that others would listen. Susan's father was the "man of the house," and women were relegated to background status. This troubled her mother, but she felt no choice but to "soldier on." When she was an adolescent and throughout college, Susan attracted boys and used her sexuality for self-validation. Male attention felt like love. Being part of a couple delayed facing her biggest fear—fear that she was unlovable. However, relationships were short-lived and ended painfully. Through our work together, she realized by tolerating emotional distress and downplaying her own needs, she was holding herself back from intimacy and lasting love. Hard as it was, she had to cut the ties with John.

Susan decided to date and met kind, honest men. However, her challenge was to heed warning signs specific to her: If she was doing all the giving, if she made excuses for his deplorable behavior or if he was terribly needy, she had to stop and regroup. Susan is healing.

Kendra's Story

In therapy for one year, Kendra's current indecision concerned her husband of three years. Kendra (35) and Paul (29) got married after a passionate yet rocky courtship. It soon became clear that they had different expectations about the meaning of commitment, marriage and family. These past two years have been devastating: Kendra had two miscarriages and one premature birth. Paul disappeared for days, resentful of having to take care of Kendra, fearful

for his daughter's wellbeing and despondent over his lack of job success. She felt he was juvenile and only wanted to spend time with friends playing video games.

Kendra arrived for therapy tearful and preoccupied with thoughts of Paul's immaturity and irresponsibility. She wondered, "Am I not good enough? Will he change?" Kendra is not alone in placing the blame upon herself. Women want love, and when a partner may not return that love, it's easy to blame oneself for the relationship not working. She asked, "What did I do wrong? Is he comparing me to his first wife? Am I coming up short?"

Her feelings of insecurity and anger overwhelmed her. She often changed her game plan: One time, she was going to leave him, and another time, she wanted to stay. She believed she was the only person who understood him. Her baby needed a father. A woman of strong faith, Kendra attended church weekly, which gave her solace. She realized she needed to find her own path, a tenet of her religion and a family value.

Kendra is a loyal and loving person, and leaving represented "being a bad person, being cruel." She had been left many times—she knew how agonizing it could be. Now, she was riddled with guilt. She wondered, "Am I asking too much to want this pain to be over?" However, she came to understand that her responsibilities were to herself and her daughter, and she believed they deserved a healthy future.

Weighing the difficult variables in therapy and on her own helped her resolve this dilemma. With the support of family and friends, she decided to leave Paul. He needed to grow up, and she refused to be his parent. Six months later, she remains confident of her decision. Strong and resolute, Kendra is a survivor.

Pam's Story

Married to Don (40) for 15 years, Pam (36) was the mother of two happy, healthy children. Pam and Don had high-paying jobs and a spacious home. Her life looked perfect to others, but she felt empty and unfulfilled. Despite Don being a “good man and good father,” she felt no passion or emotional connection to her husband. Life is short—she noticed other men and fantasized about life with a different partner. Pam continued, “I never thought about what I wanted until now. I thought I’d be married forever. What about the kids? Is it fair to them to leave their father?”

Her background provided clues to understanding her current situation: Her father was an emotionally detached man and an erratic wage earner; her mother stoically concentrated on the family, denying her own needs. Pam chose Don--rock solid, with great earning potential--but unemotional and distant. Her choice at age 21 is not the choice she would now make. Despite knowing how much she has changed, she wondered what to do about her life now. Is it fair to leave, or should she stay?

Through our work in therapy, Pam visualized her future and summoned the courage to speak with her mother and brother. She chose to stay, at least until her children get older. She incorporated activities for herself into her life, giving her calm, joy and strength. Pam reached out to others: A women’s support group and reconnection with friends opened her to new possibilities.

Seven Steps to Resolving Ambivalence

Peter Kramer, author of Should You Leave?, wrote a statement that I believe beautifully describes ambivalence: “To have invested so much effort in a relationship, to have invested so

much imagination in dreams the relationship does not fulfill, and now to have to choose—this is the moment that pains us, confuses us.”

Difficult as it may be, resolution requires finding a balance between the emotional and the practical. Here are seven steps that helped Susan, Kendra, Pam and other women untangle their conflicted feelings.

- 1) *Make a list of the pros and cons of staying versus leaving.* Organizing your thoughts and committing them to paper give you perspective and an opportunity to express your feelings rather than hold them in. For instance, when Susan thought about leaving, she wrote a positives/negatives list.

Leaving--The Positives

calm

freedom

chance to find love

family support

good job

strength

Leaving—The Negatives

loneliness

no one to care for

not being part of a couple

vulnerable

sad

insecure

She repeated the same process for staying.

Put your list aside and revisit it once you have had time to digest your ideas. And make refinements now that time has given you greater perspective. Although you may doubt it, you’ll become clear on how you feel and what to do.

- 2) *Visualize your future. Tomorrow, one year, five years from now.*

“If I leave, what will my first day alone be like,” Pam wondered? “I can imagine the empty space next to me in bed, only one toothbrush, my clothes alone in the closet; I’ll field questions at work, set three plates rather than four for dinner, feel sad. My best friend, Jill, told me to call anytime. It’s late, but I think I’ll call her. I can also

envision going to bed without agonizing about today's disagreement; I long for a night of restful sleep."

"If I stay, the day will begin like every other day. I'll get up, get the kids ready for school, go to work, come home, cook dinner, help the kids with their homework, watch my husband at the computer, call a friend, go to bed. I know I'll think about my marriage. Can I make peace with my relationship? The kids love their Dad. I think we should try family therapy. Jill has the name of someone she trusts. I'll call tomorrow and ask her for the phone number. I want to feel proud of my choice, five years from now. Will I be a good role model for my children, if I stay?" For Pam, staying reflected her core family values: loyalty and family stability. As Pam did, try to imagine these different scenarios. See what feels comfortable.

- 3) *Determine the most important characteristics you expect of your partner.* No relationship is perfect. What do you value most: financial security, loyalty, respect, monogamy, truthfulness, honesty? Kendra expected hard work, trust and faithfulness from her partner, and she wouldn't compromise. Some things are non-negotiable.
- 4) *Face your fears.* How empowering to realize what you fear and face your concerns. Susan feared that if she were alone, she would feel worthless and unlovable. No one would ever want her. She also realized that she would experience periods of loneliness, which are a normal part of the separation and healing process. She made a plan on how to handle these moments.
- 5) *Plan your own things to do.* You may have put friends, family and activities on the backburner. What do you like to do? Taking a class or joining a group may seem selfish, but you need time for yourself; the added benefit will be increased self-

esteem. If you have children, swap babysitting time with a friend. We all need and can help each other. Pam planned weekly dinners with friends; this step helped her become more energetic and optimistic.

- 6) *Revisit your family history for clues.* What was your family like when you were growing up? If your parents were together, what kind of relationship did they have? Was open communication encouraged? Was there room to disagree and compromise? If they parted, was it an amicable separation? Did they try to work on their problems before ending the marriage? Who listened to you if you had a problem? Remember: We repeat patterns and internalize values that we learned from our family. Perhaps your family respected and rewarded selflessness, independence, fairness, generosity, for example. Family values shaped Susan's, Kendra's and Pam's belief systems: Susan valued privacy and loyalty; Kendra, self-reliance and the right to happiness; Pam, loyalty and family cohesiveness. Awareness of family values and patterns will help explain who you are and the choices you now face.
- 7) *Seek out others in your same situation.* Support groups for women are an invaluable resource. Groups may be offered at your local "Y," religious organization, school or hospital. Hearing other women's stories can be liberating, and you will see you are not alone. This worked for Pam. Also, a therapist or counselor can be an important ally and lend an objective, supportive voice.

Decisions

No one can tell you what to do. It's your choice. Equally as important is to respect your decision not to decide, or to determine that the time is not right to decide. You may want to tackle a particular goal, deal with a major life issue (such as health, an aging parent, children

graduating from high school, graduate school); build up your emotional strength, live with the thoughts for a time. You will decide if and when you are ready.

In my work, I have heard repeated heartbreaking stories of relationship indecision. Some women stay; others leave; others stay but re-evaluate over time. They learn to tolerate, as one woman noted, “living in the gray area.” Others make an investment in their relationship and work with their partner to make changes.

Choices. When you have options, you have the freedom to make decisions that are right for you.

References

Kramer, P. D. (1997). *Should you leave?* New York: Penguin Books, 19.