

Childhood Sibling Relationships May Be Affecting Your Marriage

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis

Mark and Marlene, high school sweethearts, have been married for 18 years. They are clearly committed to their marriage, but it is an awful marriage. He is a functional alcoholic; she complains, and they argue constantly. Five years ago, they tried therapy but dropped out when his work made it inconvenient to attend sessions. A year ago Marlene called for help, but spent the entire time complaining about him. She refused to talk about what she could do to improve the situation for herself, such as leave him, attend Al Anon, move into a different bedroom, give him an ultimatum to get help or she'll leave, etc.

They are back in therapy again, with complaints and counter-complaints. She says his drinking is worse; he complains she criticizes everything he does; she says she can't trust him to do things well because he comes home drunk. And on and on.

During the second week of their futile counter-complaints, I am explicit: without dealing with his drinking, nothing will change. He says he wants to stop, but the stress of his high powered job adds to his drinking. Besides, business deals are made (and broken) over drinks. After these explanations, he adds, "But if I'm honest with myself, I guess I always find reasons to drink. I've been drinking since I was 14; that's a lot of excuses over 28 years."

Mark finally acknowledges he is an alcoholic. "I know I need to get help. Just as soon as this last deal at work comes through, I can take a few days off to dry out."

Two months later, I point out he is still saying "as soon as I close this last deal."

"I can see that, but I can't leave my job until I find something else, and I can't do that until I have time to focus on it. Probably next month," he again promises Marlene.

As Marlene continues to ineffectually complain about his drinking, he tucks his chin into his chest, looking very much her victim.

I ask, "What happens to you when she complains? You say you want to stop yourself, yet you pull back as if you disagree with her."

"I rebel against anyone who tells me what to do. I always have."

"When you were a child, who were you rebelling against?"

"I don't know." He speaks softly, his chin still tucked low into his chest.

"Your father? Your mother?"

"I don't know. He oozes passivity, exerting no effort to think about this.

I push on. "Your sister or brother?"

His head bobs up, looking at me for the first time. There is a silence and then he says, "You said my brother and that got me thinking. Terry is four years older than I; when we were he was always beating me up and bossing me around."

"And here you are, three decades later, still rebelling against anyone you perceive as bossing you around. What's most curious, though, is how you set yourself up for someone (I point to Marlene) to boss you and be mean to you."

He looks stunned. "Huh?"

"For example, a few minutes ago, Marlene talked about the fight you two had the other night when she found pot in your pocket. She said you couldn't have pot in the house; she didn't want your children to discover their father uses drugs. Do you remember what you said back to her?"

"Yes," he says belligerently. "I said I'd have it in the house if I wanted and if she had a problem with that, I'd just move out."

"Think about that. Do you want your kids to know you use dope?" He sadly shakes his head. "You were more invested in rebelling against Marlene than in saying, 'Of course I don't want my kids to see this so I won't keep it in the house.'" Mark hides his head in his hands. "Jesus. I do set it up, don't I? Why do I do that?" He is bereft.

Marlene tries to rescue him by shouting at him about the marijuana. I point out, "This is your usual routine. You pull him out of his despair by yelling at him so he can yell back which is better than his depression. This time, I want to give Mark a chance to look inside." I turn to him, "to stop running away from your feelings.

"How are you feeling right now?"

"Awful." He chin is back on his chest.

"Can you put words to what you're feeling?"

"I'm caved in on myself," he whispers.

"And what feeling are you protecting in that caved-in position?"

"Fear."

"Try speaking from inside that fear."

"It's just fear."

"Try speaking form your own voice, 'I'm scared.'"

"I'm scared," comes out in a tiny, but flat voice. After a few seconds, he adds, "I need space. That's what the alcohol and pot do; they help me carve out space just for me."

"What type of space?"

"A safe space, to be by myself." His lips continue to move; it takes time before the words catch up. "Terry was a terror."

I wait to catch his eye. "You've been dabbling with getting help for years but nothing has changed. If you really want change, we have to do something very different. Are you game?"

He's skeptical. "What do you have in mind?"

"You need help; let Terry you. He was part of the early fear. Give him a chance to help uou move past this – in order to save your marriage. If you tell him your life's a mess, and you need his help, do you think he would come to therapy to help you?"

Without hesitation he nods. "Yes, he would. We don't talk very often and never about anything serious, but I know he would."

It's amazing how many people, whether they have a good or rocky relationship with their siblings, know they could call upon them for help.

Mark and Marlene leave the session, not holding hands like in a fairy tale, but without a billow of tension surrounding them.

Dr. Karen Gail Lewis has been a marriage and family therapist for over 40 years with an expertise in adult siblings. She is author of numerous [books on relationships](#) – for siblings, marriage, singles, and friendships. Since 1996, she has run [Unique Retreats for Women](#) and does weekend retreats for adult siblings. She has offices in Washington, DC area and Cincinnati, Ohio. She is also available for phone and skype consultations.

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