



## A Time Out for Troubled Marriages

A Time Out for Troubled Marriages:  
Therapists Push 'Controlled Separation'

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The couple had been married for 10 years, but the relationship had become troubled. They had no kids, not even a pet, no overpowering reason to stay together. They decided to separate.

To most people, that would be a pretty clear sign they were headed for divorce. But that wasn't the idea here.



They sat down with Meg Haycraft, a couples counselor in Chicago, and negotiated detailed terms for something called a "controlled separation."

Time limit: Five weeks, ending April 4.

Living arrangements: He stays, she moves out to a girlfriend's apartment.

Finances: Any purchase over \$500 requires consulting each other.



Contact: Three phone calls a week, unlimited emails, a date with each other every Saturday night.

Sex? That was in the contract too. None planned, but if one feels "affectionate" they have the right to "check that out" with the other.



Separation in the U.S. has become essentially a prelude to divorce. But a new approach that has quietly attracted interest over the past few years aims to do the opposite. Controlled separation is usually negotiated in a therapist's office, never in a lawyer's, and its ultimate goal is to save the marriage by putting a concrete limit on the time apart (usually no more than six months) -- and negotiating more than a dozen hot points into a written contract to eliminate the uncertainty, insecurity and second-guessing that can become toxic in a troubled relationship.

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The movement is gaining adherents. A small but growing number of therapists across the country are trying to incorporate controlled separation into their practices. (Thirteen of them participated in a 7½ hour training session at a marriage conference last month.) Religious groups both here and abroad are using it, including the Hong Kong Catholic Marriage Advisory Council. And the U.S. military has expressed interest in folding it into its programs to help combat the high divorce rate among service men and women.



Controlled separation can be seen as a sort of "time out" to, at least temporarily, halt the move toward divorce. Both husband and wife pledge not to seek legal counsel or file for divorce during the separation. And they agree not to speak about their troubles to others to avoid incendiary gossip. Twelve other areas, from pets, to child care, to sex, are also laid out. In some areas, like personal contact, the contract is so detailed that it not only specifies that the couple will go on "dates" with each other but it stipulates the day of the week and who will initiate them.



"I guess I felt safe knowing nothing more major was going to happen," says Leah Klug, who entered into a six-month controlled separation agreement with her husband a few years ago. The two have since moved back together and bought a new home with their two children. Her husband, Nathaniel, agrees.

"It kind of helped remove the emotion," he says. "It actually made you think about what you were doing."



In most separations, there are few rules. Legal separations, negotiated by lawyers, generally cover only finances and children. So-called trial separations, in which one spouse simply moves out with no guidance, are generally emotional and unpredictable since no one is ever sure what the other is up to. A marriage and family therapist in Wisconsin, Lee Raffel, developed the idea of controlled separation in the late 1990s out of "sheer frustration," after some three decades of counseling couples.



"I could see that when couples separated, they were having a terrible time," she says. "They didn't know if they wanted to stay or go. They only knew they were unhappy. They didn't know how to solve their problems and they did a lot of nasty things to each other."

She outlined the concept in a book called "Should I Stay or Go?" Since it was published in 1998, the idea has slowly caught on largely by word of mouth, often by people who read the book and contacted couples counselors to try to implement it. (Ms. Klug, for example, emailed Ms. Raffel for an appointment after borrowing the book from her local library and realizing that she lived in the same state.)

Rea Wynder, a court-certified family mediator in Virginia, is trying to incorporate controlled separation into her divorce mediation work for couples she thinks might benefit from it. She also would like to change the term to "marriage pact" to put a more positive spin on it.



"I think it's a huge step in the right direction to have people agreeing on any set of common rules or common undertakings or promises for exactly how separate they are," says John Crouch, a divorce lawyer in Arlington, Va. Mr. Crouch has never had a client who has tried a controlled separation but he says he heard about it a year or two ago at a conference.



It doesn't always work, though. Elsie Radtke, associate director for the family ministries office at the Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago, says that more than half of the couples she counsels through controlled separation end up divorcing. But she feels that the process benefits those couples too. The split, she says, is often far less acrimonious as a result of the controlled separation.

"People ask what guarantee can you give me that we won't get a divorce," says Ms. Haycraft. "I say, 'none,' but you've slowed down the process."



Featured in the Wall Street Journal, Family Matters Section on July 7, 2005 an article titled, "A Time Out For Troubled Marriages".