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## Lessons for all of us can be found in the McDonnells' imploding marriage

by Jessica Contrera Washington Post Staff Writer (Style Section)



WASHINGTON – There's an excuse people love to use as the reason they picked up the National Enquirer in the grocery line or used to watch "Jersey Shore" with their teenagers. It makes me feel better about my own life.

For nearly a month, Richmond has been host to its own drama-filled binge watch: the corruption trial of former Virginia governor Robert F. McDonnell (R) and his wife, Maureen. Last week, McDonnell, prompted by his defense team, took the stand to paint a picture of the crumbling, collapsing, utter destruction of his marriage.

Monday, the prosecution took a run at the McDonnell love story, armed with lists of vacations the McDonnells took together and photos of the couple holding hands, seemingly calling into question the former governor's tale of desperate love letters, financial woes and a wife with wandering affections.

One thing the trial has established? Marriage is hard.

So while lawyers, supplement manufacturers, future first ladies and wedding caterers may glean their own lessons from the McDonnells' saga, it is also a teachable moment for anyone looking to make it past the "extended honeymoon" phase of a relationship.

There is a lot we can learn from a marriage publicly imploding, defense strategy or not, couples counselors say.

As one therapist puts it: We used to learn about love from fairy tales. Now, we have celebrities.

It takes two to make a thing go right (but wrong, too)

The governor's testimony does not paint a pretty picture of his wife -- Fairfax, Va., therapist Patricia Gibberman said. According to the defense, Maureen McDonnell displayed fiery anger and hate and threatened to wreck her husband's possessions.

The reality is that it takes two to either build a marriage or destroy it, Gibberman said. All the things that a marriage needs: respect, listening, comfort, (insert your own brand of love here); have to come from both people.

Think of your relationship as a bank account

Write each other a generous check for your relationship bank accounts. A bank account where every demand, criticism or stressor is a withdrawal from the account, Thriveworks owner and therapist Anthony Centore said. McDonnell cited pushing his wife away, ignoring her requests for help with speeches and all the things he has done to hurt her.

Research shows, Centore said, we need five times as many deposits as withdrawals, like quality time, words or appreciation, or a positive touch.

In order to make deposits, you have to first make time

There have been multiple references to time being a central problem in the McDonnells marriage: the former governor not giving enough of it to his wife and family, in particular. It's extremely important in every stage of a family's evolution to make some time for the marriage, no matter how limited, said Arnold Sell, therapist and owner of Marriage Works. It could be as simple as taking 10 minutes each day to touch base and see how each other is doing.

When listening, do your best to actually listen

The former governor described a number of nasty fights with his wife, with one ending in the first lady throwing a credit card bill and screaming. Robert Sheavly, of Central Washington Psychotherapy Associates, said that although fighting is normal for couples, many conversations are not fruitful because too often, people aren't listening in a useful way. You should be listening to try to understand what your partner's worldview is, not just listening to gather information with which you can defend the way you see things, Sheavly said.

Power struggles are terrible for a relationship

According to the testimony, McDonnell directed his wife on how to use her money. She lied about money over Christmas dinner, knowing he wouldn't correct her in front of their children. These are backhanded messages of you can't make me, or, we're doing what I want actions, Sheavly said. In a couple that's battling for control, even the smallest actions: telling a child he or she can do something the other parent said no to, loading the dishwasher in a way that a partner has said he doesn't like can be seen as an effort to claim authority. We don't feel connected to someone who is trying to control us, Sheavly said.

Therapy might have saved them

Having kids, changing jobs, moving homes, struggling with finances these McDonnell family experiences are simply that: family experiences. Many couples go through this, **Caring Couples, Happy Lives therapist Marika Martin** said. It's just unfortunate that they weren't able to get help before it was too late. Although there was talk of the former first lady seeking counseling, McDonnell testified that the couple never went through with it out of his wife's fear that it wouldn't be kept private. Martin said that while fear of a stigma sometimes holds couples back, counseling is proven to help couples manage the transitions in their lives.

Even for the McDonnells, she said, there's still time.