

HOW TO LOVE A PASSIVE OR DISENGAGED SPOUSE?

<https://fiercemarriage.com/how-to-love-a-passive-or-disengaged-spouse>

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Ryan: A few episodes back, we talked about what if you're unequally yoked as a couple? In other words, what if you're married to someone who is not a believer or if you married someone, and since you've been married they've walked away from Scripture? Well, this is a similar topic.

Selena: It's a spin-off from it.

Ryan: It's a spin-off from it. And what we're hoping to process through today is how to deal with a spouse or how to love a spouse who is passive. I think of husband who is not leading his family well, not engaging in conversations-

Selena: Or wife who's always grumbling, who's always complaining and going against the things of Scripture, instead of embracing what is laid out for us.

Ryan: So what is a husband or wife to do if their spouse is not trying? How do you get them to reengage in the relationship? So we're really gonna have a conversation in real-time. And we hope it helps you. We hope it blesses you. We'll see you on the other side.

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Ryan: This is probably the number one topic of concern. I think, generally speaking, you have a wife who just wants so badly for her husband to come to the table or a husband who's trying to love his wife well and she doesn't seem to be responding. When you lose that connection, and there's a slow erosion and there's that distancing, it's just so difficult to reconcile, to bring it back to the moment.

Selena: It feels impossible.

Ryan: So it's a valuable conversation to be had. And I'm hoping that we can help some folks today. But first, my name is Ryan. This is my lovely wife Selena. We are the faces, voices, founders of Fierce Marriage. We've been doing this for a number of years. And we're honored that you would spend some time with us. Whether you're watching on YouTube, or you are listening on the podcast, welcome.

If you want to engage in this conversation, the best place to do that is probably on YouTube for the comments. That's where we tend to have the most

interactions with folks. We would also love it if you want to leave a rating and review on the podcast. That means a ton. It helps us to fight our way through the milieu of noise and other podcasts. Those ratings really do help.

But if you want to partner with us, I will say this, that partners like our patrons, right? So if you're a patron, thank you, thank you, thank you. Our patrons have made this a sustainable ministry for our family.

It's really, really tough to be in ministry like this without also having some other source of income, which for us, it's the books that we write. It's that plus our patrons has made this sustainable. So thank you so much for being a part of that. If you want to join that team of fierce patrons, go to fiercemarriage.com/partner.

So today's topic: how do we get a passive spouse to engage and to re-engage? There's some assumptions that we have to make at this point, is that you're probably not in a healthy spot.

Selena: Right. You're probably one of three types of couples. One that is, like you said, not in a healthy spot. You can see things, you don't know how to deal with stuff, but you know that things are wrong.

The second would be you're in an unhealthy spot but haven't realized it yet. So you kind of are just slowly sort of drifting apart and maybe not really seeing it.

Ryan: So maybe this might be the wake-up call that says, "Hey, it's actually pretty unhealthy what you're going through right now." And then the third type of couple is you're on the brink. It's like you feel like your spouse has given up.

I mean, you're watching a marriage video or listening to a marriage podcast, so maybe you haven't quite gotten there yet. But the point is, is you just feel like it's so far gone so you might as well cut bait and try again, you know, try another marriage. And we're here to tell you there is hope wherever you're at, whatever end of that spectrum you're on.

Or maybe there's a fourth type of person where you are in a healthy place and you feel like you're getting along and you're connected with your spouse but you know what it feels like when you start to disconnect. So maybe we will give you some tools here today that will give you, I guess, a way to tell when the writing's on the wall and you can make proactive adjustments. So does it look like to have a spouse who's maybe disengaged?

- Selena:** Some indicators I think to say, "Okay, maybe, yeah, we're not engaged. This totally identifies me or not." We always say like bad communication, but I think lazy or mediocre, just passive, not skillful or tactful or thoughtful communication, just "whatever comes out comes out, and this is how I say it and this is how it's going to be."
- Ryan:** Yeah. It'll be like apathetic, really focused on just, "I don't care how my word strike you, I don't really care what value my words add to your life. I just gonna say what needs to be said. I don't really care." That's a sign of a disengaged spouse.
- Selena:** Right.
- Ryan:** Another one is you are having a pretty consistent fights and disagreements.
- Selena:** Yeah. Agreement is like a foreign idea to your marriage.
- Ryan:** We've had seasons in our marriage where, as things have grown cold, believe it or not guys, Ryan and Selena, not perfect. We haven't figured it out. And we have a lot of tracks history of mistakes that we've made and we've grown apart at times. And you find thematic disagreements where it's like you just can't seem to get along.
- Selena:** That's an indicator of, you know, one of you being passive in the marriage. The next one is no spiritual life or growth. Again, we can just see this in the fruit of what's been produced in our life. If you know that you struggle with patience and you are yelling more than you always do, it's a consistent just zero patience, then I would bet, I would put a lot of money in the fact that you probably are not spending time with the Lord, probably not allowing the Holy Spirit to grow you in certain ways and for the good of your own heart and your marriage.
- Ryan:** Another way that you can tell if you've been disengaged with one another is you have little or no agreement around important decisions in life. That could-
- Selena:** What church to go to.
- Ryan:** That's a big, important decision.
- Selena:** That's a big, important decision.
- Ryan:** Maybe a career change. Or you're finding that your spouse is making decisions that seem like pretty decent-sized ones, whether they're financial decisions, making purchases-

- Selena:** And they're not telling you.
- Ryan:** They're not telling you. Or even like how do we disciple our kids? Or what does it mean for you to be a man-
- Selena:** The head of the house.
- Ryan:** ...the head of the household, biblically speaking, what does it mean to be the woman of the household biblically speaking. You just can't find agreement on that stuff. That's typically-
- Selena:** Or you're not actively working towards it; you're just ignoring it altogether, and you're just trying to survive.
- Ryan:** Another one. This is a huge one. This doesn't mean to cast any shame, but it's just if this is happening, this is an indication that you are growing distant and disengaged. Intimacy. If you have a non-existent intimate life or intimacy is very rare.
- Selena:** Sex in case anybody misses that. You're not-
- Ryan:** Well, yeah, sex, for sure.
- Selena:** Part of it.
- Ryan:** Also emotional intimacy,-
- Selena:** Emotional intimacy, spiritual intimacy.
- Ryan:** ...being known and knowing one another.
- Selena:** But the physical part is hard, to... If you're not regularly having sex, that can be an indicator I think of-
- Ryan:** It's good and right for a couple to regularly exercise their marital rights, intimately speaking. Paul talks about that. I think it's in 1 Corinthians 6 or 7. Not withholding from one another. Like giving of yourself. It's not about taking from your spouse, it's about giving of yourself. And if neither of you are willing to give, that's a big red flag.
- I think in one of our books we wrote, Sex can't make a marriage, but I think sex as a category can break it, right? Whether it's infidelity or just the inability

to maintain a healthy level of intimacy can definitely cause you to grow cold. And a lot of times it's a symptom, but it can also be a cause.

Selena: Right. For sure.

Ryan: So maybe we should dedicate an episode to that. I know that we've had many instances in our own marriage where our dysfunction in our intimate lives, whether we've not met each other just logistically in the right times and moods and whatnot, that can either be a symptom of us not connecting or it can also lead to deeper dysfunction in our marriage. And it has done both for us.

Selena: Yes.

Ryan: So what are some underlying reasons? Okay, so we've talked about what is disengaging and what does that look like, what are some symptoms of that, or what are the causes of those types of symptoms. And I think there's a few.

We've talked about being unequally yoked. That was, again, a couple episodes back. But that's obviously going to be a huge thing. Because if you're just seeing the world through two different lenses, it's going to come to it. It's going to bear a consequence in some area of your lives. It's always going to be underlying reason.

Or you might have mental illness. Mental illness is real. Depression is real. Anxiety is real. We have friends and family who have dealt with those things on severe levels. And they cause problems—the issues, the mental illness causes problems in those people's lives.

There's times when I feel pretty down in the dumps, I'll say. I won't say I get depressed. But definitely when I'm having a hard time emotionally and mentally, it's really hard for me to love you well.

Selena: Right.

Ryan: So how have we gone about mitigating that? Well, in some cases... I've never taken medication for anything like that, but we do have people in our lives, friends that we know that have. And that's a common grace of God to go to a doctor or a psychiatrist and to have them prescribe medicine to help balance out what's happening in this body that God's given us that is still subject to the fall.

Just because you're a Christian doesn't mean you all of a sudden don't get sick anyway. But thank God that we live in a time when we have medicine available to us to help with that.

Now you have to be careful not to get dependent on medicines and things like that. Always be trusting the Lord ultimately. That's a big can of worms I don't want to open that one right now. But the point is, is that can bear weight on your relationship. And it's important to recognize that if you're ever going to find a path back to one another.

And then another one, this underlying reason is, just generally speaking, this broad category of passivity. What do we mean by that? There's husband passivity. There's sins of passivity that can be on the husband's side, but also on the wife's side.

So for a husband to be passive, I can kind of just throw in the towel. I'm not going to really lead. I'm not gonna really engage. For whatever reason, I've just lost interest, and I'm not responding to the call of God on my life as a husband to love my wife as Christ loved the Church, to die to myself to love her in a metaphorical sense and I've chosen the sins of passivity.

So I'm just gonna sit on the couch, you know, both literally or just or figuratively. I'm gonna just disengage, couch potato. I'm just gonna be, you know, watching the game, but never really watching over my own household, so to speak. Or even playing video games, and never playing with and engaging with my kids or engaging with my wife. That's passivity. But how does passivity tend to look for my wife's side of the equation?

Selena: I think, you know, for women, we can tend to run our mouths and just say whatever we feel, however we feel it, and just let it go. "Who cares? This is how I feel, I'm just gonna say it." We can deal with a lot of discontent in our own hearts, wanting to have the life that someone else has.

We ignore our children because they're too hard to deal with. I just want to let someone else take care of that. It feels too hard. I just don't want to be that person. I want to be the person I see scrolling, you know, when I'm scrolling through whatever social media is.

One of the ways I think the enemy really gets in our hearts as wives is to just breed those seeds of bitterness and discontentment in our homes.

Ryan: I would also add to that as-

Selena: Oh, would you? *[laughs]*

- Ryan:** A wife that can become a doormat and an enabler.
- Selena:** Yes. Okay.
- Ryan:** And you have a husband who maybe isn't being passive, but has sins of aggression. Maybe, you know, I'm verbally not loving you well, I'm being aggressive towards you. If you're passive in that moment-
- Selena:** It's true.
- Ryan:** ...you would just be a doormat. And you become an enabler and you become a means by which my sin flourishes. And now my sin is not your fault, but you have your own stuff to deal with. And that's this. So I think that causes a wife... it does something in the heart of a wife, and I can't speak for every wife in all time, but a switch flips in the heart of a wife that says, "I'm no longer going to begin to voice godly opinions in this marriage. I'm no longer gonna fight for my marriage in this way. Instead, I'm just going to let the cards fall where they may.
- Selena:** It kind of falls into this peacekeeping instead of being a peacemaker, which we've talked about in many of our episodes in terms of marriage. So what do we do about all that? *[chuckles]* What are the thing we can do?
- Ryan:** I mean, if you're here watching this do and you want to know, okay, I've got... I'm just picturing the wife because we get a lot of wives writing in-
- Selena:** It's mostly the wives that respond. We do get men that say-
- Ryan:** Although I know it's probably gotta be about equal because it's a self-selecting demographic, right? The people that are writing in via social media, they're going to be most likely wives.
- Selena:** How dare you! *[Ryan chuckles]*
- Ryan:** Just statistically speaking, that's what it looks like. But you also get husbands who are desperately, desperately trying to love their wife well, and for whatever reason, sometimes not a fault of his own. Sometimes it is. They cannot get their wife to love them back.
- Selena:** To warm up to them.
- Ryan:** To warm up to them. Yeah. I mean, what's the phrase? Hell hath no scorn? Or Hell hath no fury like a scorn of a woman. And scorn could be something that

you caused her scorn or she's just chosen to be... It makes you the object of her scorn.

So what do you do as a believer? Okay, this is again our whole worldview indicates how we act and the decisions we make and the wisdom that we apply. And so being biblical Christians. We believe in the Bible, we look to the scriptures and we say, "What are we called to do?"

Now we can look at a number of passages. We can look at Colossians, we can look at the parallel verses in Ephesians where Paul says, "Husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church."

Okay, think about, husband, if your wife is disengaged from you, what do you do? Well, just look, what does Christ do when His church has disengaged from Him? We started reading judges as a family because it's a great book for five-year-olds. *[both laughs]*

Selena: But there's a pattern in judges. You have the people of God, they promised they would never turn away from Him. Well, lo and behold, they do turn away from Him. And then God rises up enemy nations to oppress them and to cause them to correct their hearts. They then cry out to God and say, "God save us," and then God will raise up a judge or a deliverer to deliver them from the persecution.

So there's this pattern of God-loving people who've disengaged with Him. And the way He loves is always gracious, but sometimes it's a little bit... It looks more like Judges. And sometimes it looks more like-

Selena: 1 Corinthians 13?

Ryan: 1 Corinthians 13.

Ryan: And Ephesians 5. So husband, pursue your wife, and wife too, pursue your husband in ways that are godly, that are aligned with scripture. Be subject to the Scriptures. And by how you love him... I forget where this is. This is a passage. I just read it. I think it might be in Peter. It says, "Through your witness and how you love them, you can show them back to Christ."

Selena: And it's something you have to do. You have to look outside of yourself because it's so easy for us to just project how we feel is probably how they feel. So I'm going to say to them what I would want somebody to say to me, when really, again, reminder, they are not you. They are your spouse. They are different than you. They receive love differently. They hear love differently. They respond to it depending on how you show it.

So, again, going back to the word, going back to what God's authority says about how to love patiently, kindly. It takes perseverance, it always hopes. This is not the world's standard of love because the world standard of love is whatever you feel like it is. and those feelings will fade and they will not stand. They cannot last.

Ryan: Well said.

Selena: So we go to the Bible, we stand on it, we stake our lives on it. And we say, "Okay, the Lord will give me the strength to love my spouse who is not engaged. I have everything that I need in Christ Jesus. He is sufficient."

Ryan: And you're gonna have days where you feel like everything that we just said absolutely resonates, and you feel, "Yeah, I have everything I need." Then there's gonna be days where you feel like, "Where are you? Did you leave and turned the lights off when you left?" And we're here to tell you that He has not left you and that you can still hold fast to His promises.

Does God promise that He will make your marriage perfect? He hasn't made that promise. He has promised to give you all you need for life in godliness.

Selena: And no time is wasted. I just want to say that of God as well.

Ryan: That's good.

Selena: God does not waste time.

Ryan: But in the middle of that... Okay, so you're still charged with loving your spouse how God has charged you with loving your spouse regardless of how they love you back. But also you can pray. There are some things that are in your hands to do as a husband or a wife but also pray. Don't just do those things in the vacuum of cold obedience.

Selena: I would say start with prayer.

Ryan: But do those things and pray that the Lord would use your obedience to bear fruit in the heart of your spouse.

Selena: I would say pray for the heart of your spouse. Start with prayer. Start with a prayer to the Lord that He would soften your heart, that your spouse's heart would be soft, and that you guys would be able to connect and just a continual pursuit of God's will and trusting God, surrendering your own will to His.

Ryan: And you can be on this spectrum. Like we said, you could be in the almost completely done stage of a time of coldness and distance, or you could be, "Man, we can't seem to find agreement here," or "my husband has been playing way more video games lately and our relationship is suffering for it." So if you're on that end of the spectrum, it's gonna be different, it's going to look different. So you're gonna pray, you're still gonna pursue, it's going to look different.

Selena: Right.

Ryan: So this next point here on what to do might be helpful. On this other end of the spectrum, the one where it's not necessarily as serious is that seek to understand exactly what's happening and try to put that into words.

I know, for me, if I'm stressed out, which frankly it's most of the time... I'm just gonna say that. I feel like it's constant. But I want to escape. And the way that I escape is I get lost in some that Netflix show or something that I don't have to think about. It can just happen to me.

I know that if we had video games I would probably go toward that. There's a reason we don't have video games is because... I wouldn't say that I'm a gamer, but it's cheap entertainment. And I'm prone to wanting to go escape into cheap entertainment.

I'm more of a homebody in that way. Some guys escaped by going out into a bar or they go out and go, I don't know, hunting, or they go hiking or they go to the wilderness.

Selena: Escaping struggle in your life.

Ryan: So like if you have a spouse that's disengaged and they're showing you those types of things, ask yourself, what's going on? "Ryan sure has been watching a lot of whatever lately. Maybe he's stressed." Instead of just reacting to the symptom, try to look at the root cause of it.

Selena: I mean, if you're familiar with your marriage and you're familiar with some of the cycles and the signs and the triggers, address it as soon as you can.

I mean, for women that might look like a lack of communication. It could look like extra spending. It could look like escapism. It's different. I fall into books. I love reading books. And I would happily sit and read for hours and just ignore whatever's happening here. But that is not what God has called me to do. So we need to keep moving through.

- Ryan:** So when you read, "Oh, Selena, she's been reading a lot lately. I wonder if she's gone through some stuff." *[chuckles]*
- Selena:** No, I just found good books. That's all. So pray and pursue your spouse. Pray and pursue God's will. First, pray and pursue your spouse. Seek to understand what is actually happening. Get the indicators. Take note of kind of the rhythms of what you guys are falling into, how he's escaping, or how you're trying to escape and why. Acknowledge each other's feelings.
- So voice those, acknowledges those, empathize those. But do it in a way that is not so attacking or combative.
- Ryan:** I would add to that or maybe change that a little bit, because if you've got somebody disengaging, they maybe aren't willing to have that conversation, at least acknowledge to yourself what you're feeling—you're feeling disconnected from your spouse. You're feeling like they have withdrawn from you. And try to put words to that.
- And part of that process, too, and this is huge, don't necessarily do that in a vacuum. Find somebody who trust, who loves you, who loves the Lord, who understands His word-
- Selena:** Right. Who's advocating for your marriage, not just a gossip session about your spouse.
- Ryan:** "Listen, Johnny," my fictitious friend-
- Selena:** Fictitious son. *[Ryan chuckles]* He's fictitious everything.
- Ryan:** Maybe he's a mature son. *[Selena chuckles]* "I feel like my wife is pulling away from me and I don't know why. I can't figure it out." As you start to articulate that, you start to realize, "Oh, I can be praying for this in very specific ways. I can be trying to spearhead loving her in a very specific way that is informed by how you've been able to articulate it."
- Selena:** You can't change your spouse. I mean, that is the end all be all. We cannot change the hearts of our spouse. We can pray, we can go to the God who does change hearts, who can change our spouse. But again, ask the Lord what you can be doing. How can I be trusting in the Lord when my husband seems disengaged to me? How can I be a way in which God can use me to reconnect back to him?
- Ryan:** Part of the beauty of marriage is this covenantal dynamic. That if you are just willing to stick it out and play the part of a godly husband and play the part of

a godly wife, in faith, in obedience... doesn't mean it's going to be a silver bullet that fixes everything. But the covenantal framework that God has designed for marriage is strong enough to withhold the season you're going through.

Selena: Yeah. And sometimes, like you said, I think it's just putting your hands to the plow and doing it even before the feelings and the thoughts are there. But being obedient and doing what needs to be done.

Ryan: And to that end, if you're looking for something really tangible, we have a pair of books. Check them out. Go to prayandpursue.com. I think it's prayandpursue.com.

Selena: You have them right here.

Ryan: Yeah. Husband and wife in pursuit. And then we have two books: 40 Day Prayer Journey for husbands and wives. The point is those are gonna be really tangible ways. Now you can do those books together as a couple. They've been designed that way.

I mean, they also work if you're just a husband trying to pursue his wife or a wife trying to pursue her husband. They're geared toward loving in a way that's going to wake up and arouse that relationship. Once again, that's maybe a weird word to use. But hey, that's biblical.

Selena: All right.

Ryan: Don't arouse love before it's ready. We want to arouse love. That's our goal here.

Selena: So if you're listening to this, and you want to know more about just what it means to be Christian—We're definitely Christian. This podcast is Christian—we want to invite you into being a follower of Christ with us. We have a website set up. It's thenewsisgood.com. You can check that out.

And we want to lead you in understanding what it means but also taking the next steps into a local church, finding a pastor to disciple you and to show you what it means to follow Christ truly, not just American-style Christianity-

Selena: Hey.

Ryan: ...but truly following Christ. *[Ryan chuckles]* So with that said, let me pray. Lord, we thank you. We pray for the husbands and wives who are struggling trying to find connection with their spouse, they feel like their spouse has

grown passive or disengaged, that you would show them tangibly how they can love them in light of how they've been loved by you.

Lord, may you give them faith and hope to withstand this trial. Lord, I pray that you'd also give them a victory through it. That this would not be the end of their relationship or the end of this feeling close to their spouse. But it would just be the beginning of some new thing that you're doing in their hearts as they fight for their covenant.

Lord, we thank you for the work that you're doing in our hearts, in the hearts of our viewers and listeners. We love you. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Selena: Amen.

Ryan: This episode of Fierce Marriage is—

Selena: In the can.

Ryan: We'll see you again in seven days. Until next time—

Selena: Stay fierce.

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