

The Man Who Coaches Husbands on How to Avoid Divorce

Would he be able to help smooth out my own marital conflicts?

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A Cleveland-based blogger and divorced father named Matthew Fray wrote an agonized blog post in 2016 about the dissolution of his marriage, with an unforgettable title: “She Divorced Me Because I Left Dishes By the Sink.”

It was a raw, regretful *cri de coeur* written between sobbing on his couch in his pajamas and choking back tears during meetings at work, where he is a digital content marketing strategist for an automotive parts company.

Fray realized, too late, that he had left almost all of the household chores and childcare to his wife. Every time she walked into the kitchen to discover a drinking glass by the sink, inches from the dishwasher, “she moved incrementally closer to moving out and ending our marriage.” They divorced in 2013.

“She didn’t want to be my mother,” he wrote in the post. “She wanted to be my partner, and to apply all of my intelligence and learning capabilities to the logistics of managing our lives and household. I wish I could remember what seemed so unreasonable to me about that at the time.”

Of course, it wasn’t about the glass. “It felt to her like I just said, ‘Not taking four seconds to put my glass in the dishwasher is more important to me than you are,’” he recalled.

Fray’s post — his last name is a pen name to protect the identities of his ex-wife and young son — swiftly went viral. It was seen 4 million times on his blog, *Must Be This Tall To Ride*, and several million times on sites like *The Huffington Post*.

At the time, I was researching my book, “How Not To Hate Your Husband After Kids,” which dealt in part with invisible labor. At that point, my husband, Tom, and I had tackled most of our larger issues, but maintained an ongoing battle over his habit of leaving a trail of evidence after everything he did around our house.

“What’s the big deal?” he often said. “In the grand scheme of things, who cares if I leave things lying around?”

Once, in desperation, I counted up how many items he left scattered about for me to put away in one day: 50. “That’s 350 things a week that you take off your plate, and put on mine,” I said, feeling both aggrieved and completely ridiculous.

Many couples find themselves fighting over similar minor-but-symbolic issues, especially as we all hunker down together under quarantine. Danielle and Adam Silverstein of Manalapan, N.J., hosts of the popular podcast *Marriage and Martinis*, have squabbled about the laundry over 17 years of marriage.

He likes his laundry done in a separate load, so it’s not mixed up with their three children’s clothes and other detritus. The issue is that “he does *not*, quote, ‘do his own laundry,’” Danielle told me. “He does, like, 25 percent of it. He’ll put the laundry in the washer, and then forget about it.”

“I never do that,” he countered.

“Oh my God!” she shouted. “You left your laundry in the dryer on Monday! Adam, you literally just left it in the dryer on Monday.”

This went on for several minutes.

In my case, I could never make my husband see that my irritation wasn’t about his leaving used plates on the kitchen counter — it was the larger issues lurking behind the dishes. Research shows women spend an hour more a day on child care and an hour more a day on housework than men do; a recent survey from Gallup found that among opposite-sex couples, those ages 18 to 34 were no more likely than older couples to split most household chores equitably.

Fray understands this disparity with painful hindsight.

He said he’s heard “thousands of times” that his post saved someone’s marriage; after the umpteenth woman pleaded with him to talk to her spouse, he decided, last year, to offer relationship coaching services to men with wobbly marriages.

Sessions, which cost \$175, last about an hour and a half and are usually conducted every other week — often at night or on weekends, as Fray has kept his day job. Clients usually find him through Google searches (“Why does my husband hate me?” “Why doesn’t my wife respect me?”), which lead them to his post.

A self-described “average guy,” Fray, 41, is affable and self-effacing. He repeatedly emphasizes that he is not a psychotherapist (“I don’t have a Ph.D. or anything”) and that his services do not supplant counseling.

Nor should they. Jodie Eisner, a New York clinical psychotherapist who does have a doctoral degree, said, “This may be a good starting point for couples that aren’t yet ready to commit to

couples therapy, but are looking for some tips to improve their marriage, but it's not a substitute for couples therapy, which is still the gold standard.”

Instead, Fray said his coaching is about support, motivation and encouragement. “I don't think the average guy wearing his college football sweatshirt and drinking canned Bud Light on a Saturday afternoon while his kids play in the backyard and his wife does all the work required to keep a household afloat is going to spend much time reading ‘The Five Love Languages,’” he said.

Fray's disarming personality and the sharing of his own story make people feel like they're not being judged. “I'm not preaching from behind a podium or a desk,” he said. “Instead, I act as a kind of translator.” So far, he has worked with about 60 clients — some ongoing, others for a few sessions — whom he counsels via phone or videoconference, some as far away as Singapore. His stark message: Don't end up like me.

Fray and his then-wife met in college and married in 2004, when both were 25. They had their son four years later. While they were married, she experienced both postpartum depression and the death of her father, he said. “I passively left her to manage housework, our schedules and the logistics of caring for our son,” he said. “I call it accidental sexism, where you say, ‘Of course I'm disgusted by inequality, I'm not sexist.’ Yet every time she tried to recruit me to be invested and do things around the house and take stuff away from her so she could heal, I didn't.”

Over time, his inertia eroded their relationship. They divorced in 2013. Now relations between them are civil. They live in the same town, and attend their son's school functions. He's casually dating, and she's in a long-term relationship.

Fray's unconventional approach was intriguing. I asked Tom, my husband, if he was game for trying a session; he was. Couples counseling had ironed out most of our larger issues; perhaps Fray could confront my husband's habit of putting things down rather than away.

Fray began by sending Tom a questionnaire, which contained questions such as: What is your greatest struggle or source of frustration? During their phone session, which Tom taped and I listened to later, Fray talked to him as a friend would. He made jokes. He occasionally swore. He listened as Tom relayed his version of the dishes argument, which ended with “she tends to overreact.”

“I did the same thing,” Fray said. “But when I would tell my wife that she was overreacting about something, it became about me — about my perception of her reaction. I couldn't see that my approval or agreement was not needed or requested.”

He gently suggested that Tom first practice not judging my requests. “Instead of listening to their partner, digesting the information and caring about why they feel bad, I've found that guys invest their energy in one of three ways,” Fray said. “They dispute the facts of the story their partner just told; agree with the facts, but believe their partner is overreacting; or defend

their actions by explaining why they did it. In all three cases, his partner's feelings are invalid."

During their hour and a half session, he and Tom ran through exercises around noticing and heading off invisible labor. A running theme was: What do you think this issue looks like from your wife's perspective? What are some ways, Fray asked Tom, to be proactive with family logistics, such as meals? "You have dinner every night, so you know dinner needs to be prepared. It shouldn't come as a shock, right?" Are there any visual reminders you can use to help you remember to clean up? How can you pitch in without being asked? The sexiest thing a man can say to his partner, he said, is "I got this."

Afterward, Tom said that he saw the value in their session. "It was kind of like the organic conversations you have at a bar, or watching your kids' soccer game, or something," he said. What was even more effective, he admitted, were Fray's tales of sobbing for months after his divorce, not caring if he lived or died.

"I tell guys, 'Dude, I'm not sure if you checked the calendar lately, but it's not 1960 anymore,'" Fray said. "Step up and show up." He will keep spreading his message, one client at a time. "I tell my story," he said, "so that maybe other people won't get divorced like me."