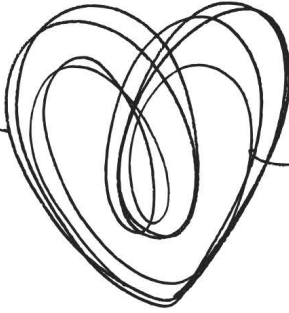


# before you split



**SNEAK  
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**SAMPLE  
ONLY**

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PROOF**

Find What You *Really* Want  
for the Future of  
Your Marriage

toni nieuwhof

*Praise for*

# Before You Split

“Toni has given us an open, raw, and vulnerable look at marriage. This book is as real as it gets. She has not glazed over or discounted the hard parts, and she has not exaggerated the celebrations. She doesn’t give us a prescription to fix our marriages but rather a path to honesty and growth. You will find in these pages a message laced with hope and filled with a challenge to get real about what you want in your marriage, why you want it, and what you’re going to do about it.”

—BOB GOFF, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Love Does* and *Everybody Always*

“I don’t like when perfect couples write perfect books about their perfect marriages. It feels discouraging, unattainable, and, above all, fake. I want real books about real marriages that offer real hope. That’s why I love Toni Nieuwhof’s *Before You Split*. She offers practical guidance and time-tested advice to make it through the messy middle while building the marriage you’ve always wanted. If you’ve ever thought, *I wonder what it would take to make my marriage awesome*, then read this book.”

—JON ACUFF, *New York Times* bestselling author of  
*Finish: Give Yourself the Gift of Done*

“If you’re stuck in your marriage or know someone who is, *Before You Split* is the practical help you’re looking for. Toni Nieuwhof is not only someone we trust personally, but she’s also a voice that needs to

be heard when more couples than ever find themselves struggling in ways they never expected.”

—MARK BATTERSON, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Circle Maker* and lead pastor of National Community Church

“*Before You Split* is a unique and wonderful gift to marriage. Toni’s clear-eyed experience as a divorce attorney, her vulnerability about her own marriage, her familiarity with marital research, her spiritual sensitivity, and her wonderful writing voice make this unlike any book on the subject we know. We cannot imagine a marriage (or life) that would not benefit from this book.”

—JOHN AND NANCY ORTBERG, authors and speakers

“*Before You Split* blends hard-earned wisdom from Toni’s own marriage with professional experience to create the essential message that all struggling couples must hear: what you are living today in your marriage is not your inevitable future. This book meets you in places of despair, conflict fatigue, and hopelessness, and offers you a life-line—a practical road map that will help you pull back the curtain of your marriage, expose the roots of repeated conflicts, and challenge your hearts to move from a place of defeat and self-protection to hope and possibility. The principles in *Before You Split* have the power to carry your marriage far beyond survival into a place primed for the restoration of intimacy and partnership. From the perspective of a psychologist who helps many couples navigate marriage restoration, I urge you to read this book to help you make the best decision you can for the future of your relationship—one not rooted in emotion alone but in wisdom.”

—CHARITY BYERS, PhD, executive director of Blessing Ranch Ministries

“Toni Nieuwhof offers us truth that is both practical and profound. This book is filled with real-life tensions that every married person has had to live with and genuine solutions that Toni has found through her vast experience and personal struggle. It’s authentic, practical, applicable, and useful for every couple who wants to live their best life together. I’m so grateful Toni has chosen vulnerability and honesty as

weapons of hope. Her words fight back against the despair of distance that threatens all our relationships. This book is a must-read for everyone in a lifelong relationship!”

—DANIELLE STRICKLAND, international speaker, advocate, and author of *Better Together: How Women and Men Can Heal the Divide and Transform the Future*

“Toni Nieuwhof is the guide you’ve been waiting for. Deeply wise, genuinely empathetic, and uncommonly insightful, Toni is a fresh voice with tried and true experience that offers a proven roadmap. Before you even think about splitting—split this book open and find the hope you’ve been looking for.”

—ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

“Toni Nieuwhof is a quiet storm—a brilliant mix of intellect, compassion, and revolution. Her new book is sure to revolutionize your marriage.”

—SAM COLLIER, international speaker and author of *A Greater Story*

“I have never read a marriage book like this one! Toni’s perspective as a divorce lawyer is so unique and extremely helpful to all marriages, not just those in trouble. It’s an amazing and helpful book that gets at the heart of a healthy marriage through both practical tips and relatable stories. As a pastor, I have already recommended it to many couples and have assigned it as mandatory reading for those I am counseling. God is going to use this book to save marriages! Thank you, Toni, for sharing decades of experience and thinking with the rest of us!”

—MARK CLARK, senior pastor of Village Church, and author of *The Problem of God* and *The Problem of Jesus*

before you split

# before you split



FIND WHAT YOU *REALLY* WANT FOR  
THE FUTURE OF YOUR MARRIAGE

toni nieuwhof



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SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

BEFORE YOU SPLIT

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*To my husband, Carey, for fighting for my heart and  
never giving up. You've made staying together a joy,  
and I'm right where I want to be: heart intertwined with yours,  
passionately in love, and once again completely smitten  
after more than thirty years.*





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## note to reader

**T**he stories I share from my years as a lawyer are composites and represent the themes of what I've seen in many families, where the facts and experiences of those involved were similar. If you think you know a man or woman from the descriptions in this book, I promise you it's purely coincidental and you don't.

I've used the terms *marriage*, *wife*, and *husband*, yet in doing so, I am not commenting on or making value judgments about your particular form of long-term relationship. I intend for these messages to help anyone who is in an unhappy relationship and searching for what to do next.

Please be aware that the legal consequences of splitting up vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and may differ depending on whether you are married or living together. Yes, I am a lawyer by training, but in this book I do not provide any legal advice about separating from your partner. If you are considering this option, you owe it to yourself to consult with a divorce attorney or family lawyer in your municipality to get personal advice for you and your family.

## is your marriage harmful?

Maybe you find yourself in an *unhappy* marriage, which describes most couples I saw while practicing family law. Maybe you're unhappy because you've drifted apart from your spouse, you've lost the passion, or you're stuck in what seems like endless conflict. Or maybe one of you has had an affair. For whatever reason, you're desperately frustrated with your unhappiness.

A *harmful* marriage is different from an unhappy marriage. How? Almost each client I spoke to said his or her spouse was emotionally abusive. In all the marriage conflicts I've seen, things get messy. People say things they don't mean or intend. In many cases, the messiness of their conflict turned out to be more mutual than they could admit.

When you're in an unhappy marriage, it's common to be confused about where your emotional pain is coming from. I heard people say things like "My husband stores up all his anger from work and dumps it on me when he gets home. He's always venting." Or "My wife gets exhausted being with the kids and starts drinking wine before dinner. Then she zones out and blows me off." Or "My spouse knows how worried I am about our finances but goes out and spends anyway." In these cases, both spouses are dealing with pain. The line between unhappy and harmful is blurred. The causes are complex and not easily identified. Is one partner drinking or overspending because the other partner is withdrawing love or avoiding intimacy? The root causes of both partners' pain may be more intertwined than either person realizes. The words and actions that come from brokenness may be labeled *emotionally abusive* at times by our spouses. And that's how many unhappily married people talked to me about their spouses' dysfunctional behavior. But I think applying the term *emotionally abusive* in this broad sense isn't helpful.

Having said that, you need to be honest with yourself and take

appropriate steps when your partner's words and actions are not just making you unhappy but are objectively and consistently harmful to you or your children. If your partner is behaving in ways that are violent or toxic, you need to protect yourself and reach out for help. Staying under the same roof with him or her may only cause you more harm. While that scenario I just described is pretty clear cut, for some married people the line between unhappy and harmful is not as easily defined. I strongly encourage you to seek help to figure out whether or not you are in a harmful relationship. Speak with a professional therapist or counselor to uncover why your marriage makes you question whether it's unhappy or actually harmful. At a minimum, talk to your doctor, a therapist, a pastor, or someone wise and objective whom you trust. Give that person full disclosure of the reasons for your concerns and take his or her advice seriously.

I know people who needed to leave their marriages because they had become toxic and abusive. Here's the point I'm underlining: I'm not advocating that you stay in your marriage, at least living under the same roof, while you're dealing with toxic, violent, or destructive behavior from your spouse. If this is your situation, please get professional help to make a safety plan.

PART 1



i can't do this  
anymore!

## CHAPTER 1



# is there really no way out of stuck?

One day, fifteen years into our marriage, we reached the tipping point. My husband, Carey, and I had endured years of conflict, now layered with ever-growing bitterness and contempt.

I was working a challenging job in legal affairs and governance for a hospital, and Carey was pastoring a growing church that demanded his full-time attention. Our schedules were packed with managing our careers and caring for our two children, ages nine and thirteen. Along with all the responsibilities of leading, serving, and volunteering at our church, we were involved with our kids and their school and all their extracurriculars, such as music lessons and team sports. Though our lives were full, we still tried to connect as a couple.

On this particular day in early summer, I breezed out of the hospital and into the front seat of Carey's Mazda. I looked forward to catching a lunch with him, just the two of us. The last of the cold bite in the air had been replaced with tropical warmth. It felt good as I breathed it in.

The lightness of my mood didn't last.

As soon as I closed the car door, Carey muttered something about how I had kept him waiting. My attempt to explain my tardiness didn't help. He criticized again. And in rushed the flood of

frustration and resentment I had held back since our most recent unresolved argument.

Keeping our lunch date suddenly seemed futile. And I wasn't hungry anymore. Thick and suffocating silence hung between us. My hope for a better connection *this time* disappeared.

What was the hidden issue behind this argument? It went deeper than my being late. Because we had so many resentments, neither of us really knew for sure. On the surface, we had an endless supply of fuel for our disputes: who would be responsible for driving to the game the next day, who was cooking what for dinner, how the last discipline incident went down, whose family's event we would attend, who was working late that night, and on and on.

This day's argument followed the same old pattern: I would get upset over something Carey said and I'd shut down. Carey would respond by trying, progressively more insistently, to provoke a response from me. The more he tried, the more upset I'd become. The angrier I felt, the more I'd withdraw into my silent and zoned-out world. And then at some point, I would break the silence and explode into either anger or tears. It was as though this pattern had worn a rut so deep that neither of us could steer us out of it. We were stuck.

This day, it was impossible to hold my emotions back. I dissolved into tears. Head tilted toward the passenger window, I watched as drops patterned the sleeve of my navy suit. I looked at my hands clenched in my lap. Gripped with despair, I pulled at my wedding ring and forced it off my finger.

"There," I said, throwing the ring on the floor at Carey's feet. "You have it. I don't want it anymore."

Inside, I was a tangled mess of conflicting thoughts and emotions, desperate for our marriage to be anything other than what it was. I didn't want to be divorced, but I couldn't endure another hour of what our relationship had become. Unwanted anger, bitterness, and resentment filled me, but I didn't know how to get rid



of those feelings. I hated being hateful. And I melted into one more self-pitying episode of “I just can’t do this anymore.”

Even with my thoughts clouded by anger, I knew the significance of my ring. When Carey was a cash-poor student in law school, he’d sold his prized Ford, the one that was a gift from his grandparents, for the money to purchase that ring. It was everything he had to offer at the time—a symbol of his steadfast love, devotion, and sacrifice. And now there it lay, discarded on the floor. That day, I was dead to compassion.

It became clear to both of us that something needed to change, and though the time for change had been many yesterdays ago, today would do.

## how did i end up here?

How had my wedding-day dream of living “happily ever after” turned out *so bad*? And how did I end up *here*, writing a book about it? Not only did I go through a desperate season in my own marriage, but I’ve also learned from the struggles other married couples have gone through that I’ve seen from various vantage points.

I’m a lawyer trained in divorce law. Even before I threw the ring off my finger, I had a clear picture of the consequences of divorce. Perhaps I felt then as you do now—I didn’t want to go there. Since the time our marriage was *that bad*, I helped hundreds of people through the often painful journey of separation, and I still do as a family law mediator. Being a divorce attorney is like practicing palliative care—only not caring for people through life’s end but caring for people through the death and aftermath of their marriages. I wasn’t motivated by any desire to help people end their marriages. On the contrary, out of compassion, my aim was to help people by ensuring their legal affairs were taken care of during a very difficult time of grief and transition.

I’m also a pastor’s wife. Carey and I have spent several decades

serving and leading our local church. Maybe you think being a church leader stacks the marriage odds in our favor. After all, we should know a thing or two about love, right? But I wonder whether it sometimes does the opposite. I believe authentically following Christ from a healthy emotional place does benefit a marriage. But if you're not emotionally healthy—as Carey and I weren't—you still get tripped up. Being in church leadership adds a pressured and complicated layer. We were passionate about serving Jesus but naive about love, and we lacked mentors.<sup>1</sup>

Much of what I have to share relates to what Carey and I went through. I was desperately unhappy in my marriage, and I didn't have a clue what to do about it. Since then, I've learned that the story I was seeing and believing at the time was not the full story. During our tough season, when I wondered if I should leave, I was unaware of how the emotional state I brought into our marriage was integrally wrapped up in the struggles and conflict we were experiencing. I had developed strong feelings of anger, bitterness, and resentment toward Carey, which had risen from our unending conflict. All I knew was I would look at our young sons and what we had built together, and I'd ache with the knowledge that I had to make a choice about what to do with all this negativity. And I thought, *It feels like it's over. So now what?*

Looking back, I know if I'd listened to my negative emotions, I would have taken my escape.

I'm grateful that I didn't.

## what about you?

Perhaps you and I have something in common. Maybe you fell madly in love with your spouse and, for at least a while, you couldn't think of anyone else. You could have been surrounded with people, but your spouse was the only person in the room.

Fast-forward to now, when at times you can't stand being in the same room.

You may have found, as many couples do, that the spark that carried you through the first few years vanished far more quickly than you expected. Maybe you still have sex sometimes, but you're not fully engaged or interested in it. You aren't that attracted to your spouse anymore. Bad blood has followed you into the bedroom.

Maybe your marriage has you feeling overwhelmed. It's been tougher than you thought it would be. Your dreams on your wedding day now seem like someone else's. You feel trapped when you look at your old wedding photos and wonder, *How did we end up here?*

You look around, and your other friends seem happier than you are. You may have even spotted better prospects. The one guy on your work team seems to have his life together, and he's a lot kinder to you than your husband is. You're trying to dismiss the nagging thought that you're wasting your life by staying.

Maybe you're in that season of a long drawn-out argument. Or perhaps you and your spouse just drifted apart over time and the feelings are gone. Maybe your partner has changed so much since your wedding day that you hardly recognize the person you married. Or maybe you're dealing with the fallout from a betrayal.

How did you go from "I can't wait to see my spouse" to "I can't stand my spouse anymore"? Something has shifted so massively in your relationship that you find yourself thinking:

*I didn't sign up for this!*

*I just can't do this anymore!*

*How can marriage be this hard?*

*This is not the same person I married!*

My heart is breaking for you because I too have been to that awful place where I thought the only viable solution was to give up and escape. Even in the quiet moments when your brain comes up with reasons to stay, your feelings ambush you in the next storm, shouting, *That's it. I'm done. It's over.* I know the unhappiness that escapes words. And as real and as forceful as those emotions are, they may be trying to tell you something—something deeper than “I’m done.” There’s probably more of a story underneath your marriage angst than you realize.

Maybe you can identify with how I felt when I flung my wedding ring on the floor. Throwing off the ring was my way of saying, *I'm done with this version of our marriage.* We needed to get honest and seek help or we weren’t going to make it.

Is it time for you to do the same?

Because I care so much about you and your family, I want to share with you what I’ve discovered as Carey and I worked through the messy middle of our marriage. What I learned is all rolled up with the insights from my work as a divorce attorney, service as a pastor’s wife, and friendship with others who have had marriage struggles. When we found ourselves stuck, we had to get serious about being teachable. We paid close attention to the advice and marriage experiences of relatives, friends, professionals, counselors, authors, and pastors. The lessons for you and me are very real.

That’s why I’m glad you’ve picked up this book. You’re seeking one more chance, hoping against all hope that maybe something in these pages will help you fix what seems irreparable. I believe it’s possible. I believe this because I’ve walked where you’re walking and I made it to the other side. It was hard work, but Carey and I stayed together—and our marriage got better. Not right away. But slowly, progressively, we took steps toward each other rather than away from each other. And now we’ve been married almost three decades. I won’t sugarcoat the rough years, but you need to know our marriage is sweet now. Almost thirty years after our

wedding day, we both agree we are thriving. Could that become your story too?

## holding on to hope

Carey bought me a new wedding ring. It didn't cost us a fortune and it isn't flashy, but it fits me perfectly, and I see it as priceless. It's a symbol of our better version of us, the one that feels fully alive. Replacing the old ring with a new one doesn't fully represent our path, though. It would be a better representation if we'd taken the old ring (which I eventually picked up off the car floor, by the way), melted it down, and fashioned it into a new one. Then the messy transition from old to new would be part of the picture. There were times when the reforming of "us" felt as though we were going through the fire and somehow making it out the other side. That messy transition from the throwaway version of our marriage to the priceless one may just be the most vital part of the story. We traversed a determined and, at times, painful journey that led us to the marriage that *does* measure up to our wedding-day dreams.

Hope sometimes isn't easy to come by. So I want to caution you about one thing. There's a danger in allowing the emotions you're experiencing right now to lead you to make long-term decisions. Yes, your emotions are real, and you need to accept them for what they are. Examine them. Learn from them. But don't necessarily give them the lead role, because there may be a story underneath your feelings, both for you and for your partner, that you haven't discovered yet.

You see, Carey and I struggled to take the first baby steps during the rough times. We had to fight against our emotions and decide to do what we'd been told would help. We stumbled, we fell, and we had to pick ourselves up and try again. I'm here to say it's

possible for this marriage that you want to escape from to transform into a marriage you never want to leave. Your marriage can go from *that bad* to *this good*, and I'm here to invite you to see how.

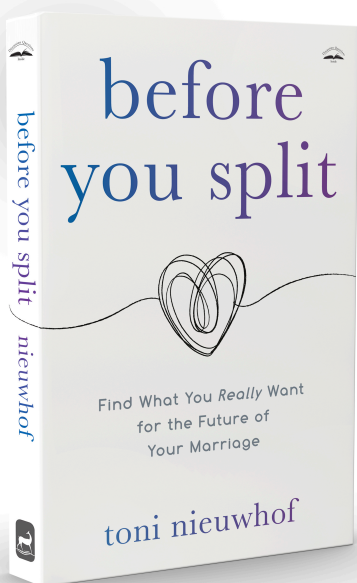
Chapter by chapter, you will gain an understanding of what you can do to overcome unhappiness in your marriage and what's at stake if you decide to leave it. Through my experience in my marriage and the experiences of other people considering divorce, I'll help you see how to solve problems in your marriage and how to avoid some pitfalls if you split. Come with me through these pages, and I promise you'll be better equipped to save your marriage, have a stronger relationship, and move out of your unhappiness.

My hope is that you'll be empowered by the practical advice that will help you create a better story for your marriage. For you and for your family and, as you'll see, for all of us.

Why don't we get started?

### **FIND WHAT YOU *REALLY* WANT**

1. In what ways has your partner changed since your wedding day or the day you started out together?
2. How would your partner answer that question about you?
3. What is your dream for your future together?



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