



Is Marital Indifference Emotionally Abusive?

The opposite of love isn't hate, it is indifference. Indifference says I don't care enough about you to give you my time, my energy or other resources to show interest, care, or love towards you. Indifference says how you feel or what you want doesn't matter to me. Indifference says you are not a person to love, but an object to use. Indifference says I don't need to change anything to make our relationship better for you if it's okay for me. Indifference says that you exist for my benefit and when you don't please me or benefit me anymore, you are replaceable or disposable.

One of the most horrific abuse stories in all of scripture is one of gross indifference. We've read the story in [Judges 19](#). A Levite and his concubine wife were traveling home when they stopped in the town of Gibeah. Expecting the typical Jewish hospitality, they waited in the open square, hoping someone would invite them to spend the night. As evening descended, an old man spotted the couple and graciously took them to his house. While the two men were getting acquainted, vile men of the city surrounded the home, beat on the door, and demanded the old man bring his guest outside so they might ravish him.

The men of the town refused to listen to the old man so the Levite grabbed his own concubine wife and shoved her out the door. The men of the town raped her, taking turns until dawn.

The scriptures say, "When her husband opened the door to leave, there lay his concubine with her hands on the threshold. Coldly he said, "Get up! Let's go! But there was no answer. So he tossed her lifeless body on his donkey and took her home" Later on he cut her up into twelve pieces and sent one piece to each of the twelve tribes of Israel, portraying himself (not his poor wife) as the victim of a horrible injustice ([Judges 19:1-30](#)).

The rape and torture by those vile men was traumatic, but I often wonder if her greater suffering was that her own husband indifferently tossed her out the door like a piece of trash, knowing full well she would be used and abused.

Marriage is the one relationship where we publically make promises to not be indifferent. We promise to love, to cherish, to protect, and to honor the person we choose to marry. When we regularly fail to keep our fundamental marital promises, the marriage is in deep trouble and to pretend otherwise is not healthy or biblical.

Karen loved her husband and wanted things to work between them but he had little time for talk or fun together. He was busy running a business and making money and these things took priority. When she tried to talk about her feelings, he became harsh and then refused to talk with her at all, sometimes ignoring her for months. When Karen

pursued or pressured him to discuss their problems, he accused her of being controlling and manipulative. The only connection he was willing to offer her was sexual and this left Karen feeling empty and used.

Finally for her own sanity, she decided to have a heart-to-heart talk about changes needed in their relationship. She prepared what she wanted to say and practiced it over and over again until her tone was neither accusing nor sharp.

Wiring up all her courage she said, "Steve, there is something that I need to share with you that's really important. Do you have time tonight?"

"Okay, but I don't have all night. There's a football game starting in about 15 minutes."

Karen took a deep breath and began. "I know you get very frustrated when I'm not responsive to your sexual needs. I know you want me to be more sexual with you and enjoy our physical relationship. But the way you treat me much of the time makes me feel angry and hurt. When you ignore me for long periods of time or accuse me of being things that I'm not, I just can't manufacture warm and affectionate feelings towards you when I'm upset and hurt. Wouldn't you enjoy our sexual relationship much more if you knew I wanted to be with you and enjoyed that part of our relationship rather than me just doing my wifely duty?"

"Of course I would," Steve said, but then briskly added, "But if wifely duty is all I can get, I'll settle for that."

Steve's response stung but it woke Karen up to his indifference toward her as his wife, as a woman, and as a person. Everything in their relationship revolved around him and his needs and, as long as her body was available when he wanted sex, it mattered little to him whether or not she loving and receptive or she was hurt or angry.

Later, Karen told me, God never intended me to be a sexual object nor to sacrifice my body to enable my husband's selfishness to continue unchallenged."

Indifference in marriage can be one of the most unrecognized yet damaging forms of emotional abuse. Let's be wise as biblical counselors not to enable someone's selfishness to grow by encouraging the ignored partner to try harder.