

Foundations

A Newsletter for Married Couples

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What Not to Say

One of the most difficult parts for many people when it comes to conflict is not saying things you'll be sorry for later. When your negative emotions are in the forefront, it is so easy to want to attack.

The Trust Factor

When you enter into a marriage, you establish an atmosphere of trust. And so you often know the most vulnerable parts of your spouse's emotional life. A strategy that works for many people is to let your partner know what's off limits at a time when you are not angry. "Don't criticize my family," one person might say, and the other might respond, Okay, and don't call my or my ideas stupid."

Other Alternatives

While it's human nature to want to take advantage of what you know are sensitive areas, you also don't want to end up alien-

ating the person you chose to spend your life with. Letting go of the short-term victory for the long-term happiness is a much better strategy. So how do you go about it?

One very effective strategy is called the soft start. Instead of leading with your complaint, find something you can say that is an appreciation or a compliment. "I like that you care about our home looking nice, but you spent more than we budgeted for the new curtains."

Once is Enough

A bit of advice from Michelle Weiner Davis, known as the Divorce Buster, is that if you have told your spouse something once, they have heard you. Repeating the same complaint over and over is not likely to reap good results. As much as you might be tempted to follow your spouse around the house or apartment repeating your complaint it's better to assume they got the

message the first time.

Who You Are VS What You Did

There's a big difference between making a mistake and being a bad person. It's OK to say "I think that's a mistake or a bad idea" but not "How could you be so dumb?" The first is an opinion about an issue while the second is a judgment about the character of the person you are having a disagreement with. Couples have disagreements all the time and they can be resolved but if you attack the character of your partner it can do real damage to your marriage.

What Do You Think

On a scale of 1 (low) to 10 (high) how would you rate your ability to resolve conflict in your marriage? Have you noticed how your families resolved conflicts and have you talked about how that compares to your style? ■

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How do you feel about conflict? Is it a normal part of life that is in all relationships, or is it the tip of the iceberg – a sign of an intrinsic flaw that is just beginning to show? The way you view conflicts will have a lot to do with how you are able to handle them in your marriage, and there are bound to be conflicts in your marriage.

Your Heritage

Without knowing it, we all learn lessons about conflict as we watch the people in our lives express their feelings. We associate certain tones of voice or facial expressions as warning signs of unpleasantness. The families we were raised in have a life-long effect on the way we view conflict, which doesn't mean that we have to handle it the same way. It just means that we have a pattern inside that will try to influence our responses.

Combining Forces

So when you marry, the patterns you each came with have to be reconciled in order to handle the conflicts that arise. The avoider marries the confronter and the games begin! Or the one who goes along to get along marries the one to whom honesty is the most important value. And the two have to come to an agreement about a style of conflict resolution that suits your two styles, that reconciles them in a way that is helpful to you both, helpful to your marriage.

The Low-Conflict Couple

There are couples who have very low conflict in their marriage. It's important to know that doesn't make them better than the rest of us, just different. They are people that tend to back away from disagreements and from the differences between



them. It's one style of relationship and there are several styles of healthy relationships, and most of them involve resolving differences rather than living with them.

The Rest of Us

The rest of us have to deal with the reality that we will have differences, and those differences may cause distress. So to decide that we will handle conflict in a respectful way, a way designed to have us come through the conflict feeling that we can go on loving each other after it, is a noble goal. We want this marriage to last a lifetime. We want it to be happy. We want it to grow and flourish. That's why giving time and energy to handle conflicts is a potent and important tool.

What Do You Think

What is your style for handling conflict? Are you an avoider? A confronter? A peacemaker? A blamer? What about your spouse, are they any of the above or do they fit another category? Do they see themselves dealing with conflict the same way you see them? You might want to ask them. ■

Resources

Gottman, John: Go to the Gottman institute to sign up for daily marriage minute, for any of their materials from trainings to books to online checkups.

Michelle Weiner Davis has a website called divorcebusting.com and there you can find her many books and trainings.

PREP trainings are available and there is material online too. Go to prepinc.com to learn more.

To see an article about David Olson's approach to conflict resolution go to this site <https://tinyurl.com/y78y74go>. It will give you a helpful two page summary.

David and Vera Mace: their classic work, *Love and Anger in Marriage* is still available on Amazon.

The Retrouvaille program is a Christian based weekend program for troubled marriages. You will find their website here: <https://www.helpourmarriage.org/>

Meet the Researchers

The internet is full of advice – some good and based on valid studies, and others not so much. Here is a guide to some of the people we believe have valuable information to share.

Gottman Tips

Have you heard of John Gottman? He is probably the best known researcher of marriage and relationships in this country. Here are a couple of his tips:

Things to avoid – what he calls the four horsemen of the apocalypse – are contempt, criticism, stonewalling, and defensiveness. Avoiding these four pitfalls really increases your chances of coming to a resolution of your conflict.

On the positive side, he says that there is a “magic” ratio for a happy marriage. Ideally, you should be having five positive interactions for every negative one, even when having a conflict.

Harville and Helen Hendrix

This couple is best known for a kind of therapy called imago therapy. Their basic advice to married couples is to “be” the right partner. Rather than finding the right partner try to be the right partner by listening carefully so you are sure you are hearing what your partner is trying to say, taking turns so one doesn’t dominate the conversation, and see conflict as a chance to grow in your relationship.

Scott Stanley

Scott Stanley and Howard Markman developed a tool called PREP, which is a program that teaches marital skills. They found through their research that learning skills to handle conflict was one way couples could change the direction of the marriage. Whereas you can’t change outside factors, like whether your parents got divorced, you can change the way you talk, the way you share disagreements. Stanley’s

techniques are also presented in a Christian format in his book, *A Lasting Promise*.

David Olson

David Olson has focused on marriage and worked with others to write books and create programs. The Couple Check-up teaches strategies for handling conflict. A unique aspect of this approach is that they recommend listing attempts that were made in the past that haven’t worked! That reminds the couple not to head down that path again, and encourages thinking about the problem from a new perspective.

What do you think?

Where do you get advice about marriage? Do you look at articles or books on marriage or talk to friends? What is the best self help book you have read? If you wanted to change something about how you resolve conflict in your marriage how would you go about it? ■

Love and Anger

Many people have spent years trying to control their angry feelings, when these feelings are not even completely under the control of the conscious mind. Anger is a primitive response to something we perceive as a danger. We are not responsible for getting angry. We are responsible for what we do with our anger after it is aroused.

Responses to Anger

1. *We can act on it*, or vent it by hitting or threatening or yelling or accusing. These painful ways to express anger don’t produce good results. If we come at our spouse with one of these responses, they have only two choices. They can fight back or run away, neither of which is particularly helpful in solving the problems that aroused the anger in the first place.

Hide It

2. *We can suppress our anger*. In this way we don’t face up to our differences. We decide not to respond to the thing that made us angry. We may decide that it’s not worth the time or energy it’s going to take to unravel it. We’ll just let it go. The trouble with this approach is that the next time a similar irritation occurs, we’re likely to be twice as angry. Now we see it as a pattern, and when we point it out we’re likely to say, “You always...” or “You never...” Often suppressed anger may lead to

other bodily responses, such as headaches or indigestion.

Work it Through

3. *We can process the anger*. After we’ve cooled down, we can sit down and figure out what we could have done different to prevent the irritation, or what could be done in the future to prevent that situation from disrupting us again. We look at all the possible ways of solving the situation and decide what we can both live with.

Take a Break

Something researchers tell us is that we can’t feel love and anger at the same time. When we’re feeling love we can’t be angry and when we’re angry we can’t be loving. That is why it is important to resolve differences after the feelings of anger have subsided. When we are relaxed and there is a chance for love to assert itself again, we can come to a conclusion that is in the best interests of us both.

What do you Think?

What’s your first reaction when you get angry? What do you think your spouse’s reaction is? Can you think of a time when you were able to resolve an issue that made you angry and you felt good about the way the two of you handled it? Do you need to apologize for something you said the last time you lost your temper? ■

Spirituality

“These studies document the effect of prayer on satisfaction with sacrifice in close relationships.”

This headline from an article in the Journal of Social and Personal Relationships was in the news recently and it spoke to the way prayer can help us as couples as we try to navigate the difficult parts of our relationship. And isn't having to sacrifice one of those things that may be hard to navigate?

Doing Double Duty

I have to be a single parent while you take a business trip. I have to juggle all the household tasks because you are sick or recovering from surgery. The reasons are many, but every marriage has some event that causes the burden on one spouse to increase. Sometimes the sacrifice is not a task either. You may have to move away from friends and family because of your spouse got a transfer. One of you might have to work two jobs because the other one was fired.

Stress = Conflict

These stressful events can lead to conflict. Even if the situation is no one's fault, it can lead to inequity in the marriage, and feeling that things are unfair in a likely formula for strife. Haven't you been in those situations? You can't find your keys and you are going to be late for work. You left your phone at your friend's house and now you can't get in touch with your wife. It doesn't have to be anything big to get the adrenaline going and all of a sudden you are primed for an argument. And the sacrifice in that situation is letting go of the upsetness, and letting go of blame.

Where prayer comes in

That's where the idea of prayer comes in – not necessarily in the moment, because it is often difficult to pray under stress, except for “Dear St. Anthony...” but the prayer that precedes

the event. A habit of prayer that the two of you develop in your life together gives you a spiritual reserve to draw on. It makes you feel like a team and it gives you an assurance that God is with you. The article indicates that the positive thoughts that are generated when you pray with someone or pray for someone makes sacrifice more palatable when it is called for in your life.

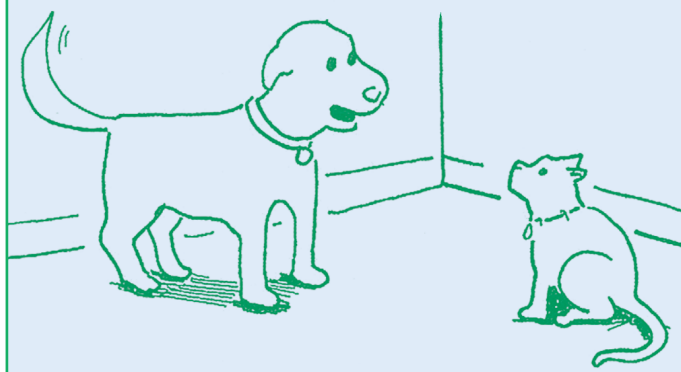
Make it a Habit

So make prayer a habit. Pray together, pray for each other, and you may find you have a reservoir of strength that you didn't have before. God wants the best for you, and for your marriage to grow and prosper, so keep the lines of communication open.

What do you think?

Do you like the idea of building prayer into your life? How do you feel about praying as a couple? Do you believe that having a common prayer life could help with conflicts? ■

“Okay... How about I agree not to destroy the furniture in exchange for your pledge to refrain from relieving yourself on the kitchen floor?”



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