

CONFLICT

Conflict is necessary, healthy, and inevitable, and occurs:

- *when we don't feel that we can be ourselves*: we feel a need to wear a mask.
- *when we feel insecure*: that something is threatening our security.
- *when we feel unsafe*: that something is threatening our safety.
- *when we feel our needs are not being met*.

Note that each of these involves a feeling. Conflict causes us to realise that we have unexpressed feelings and unmet needs, and we then have an opportunity to resolve the conflict by revealing those feelings and needs, and showing love and tenderness (Gary Smalley¹).

James Osterhaus likens conflict to the pressure along the San Andreas fault in California. Minor earthquakes are upsetting, but cause relatively little damage, and they relieve the pressure along the fault. When no minor quakes occur for a time, locals begin to fear the possibility of 'The Big One', their term for an earthquake of 8.0 or more on the Richter scale. Similarly in marriage, minor conflicts, when resolved, prevent the occurrence of a 'Big One' in the marriage, when all the unresolved conflict comes out at once².

GUIDELINES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Most couples handle conflict by one of two methods: fight or flight. Fight is obvious - they want to enter into spiteful arguments in which the aim is point-scoring at the other's expense; and flight means retreating from the problem. Neither approach will resolve the conflict: *neither fight nor flight is right*. Fighting will only increase the hurts and tension, and flight buries the conflict, only to have it resurface later. The best way to resolve conflict is to face it and work on it as a team.

Dr John Gottman says that in a conflict, you have three choices:

- You can turn against your partner;
- You can turn away from your partner; or
- You can turn towards your partner³.

1. Be civilised, and use good communication

- *Don't intimidate*. Verbal abuse is simply a form of threat. *No name-calling*. Personal insults are only intended to demean the other person, but they also demean the image of the name-caller.
- *Be assertive, not aggressive* - communicate your feelings while respecting your partner and his/her rights.
- *Avoid judgement* - avoid phrases beginning with "You should/ought/ must ...". *Don't generalise* eg "You always...".
- *Use active listening*. Listen, and repeat back what you heard and ask questions to be sure you heard correctly.
- *Be rigorously honest* - honesty leads to trust and intimacy.
- *Don't argue details* - principles are more important.
- *Don't assign blame* - That is a 'win/lose' approach. Aim instead for win/win.
- *Recognise marriage as a "we" business*. The husband and wife are not competing. Putting the marriage relationship ahead of personal interests strengthens a marriage.

2. Set boundaries on the discussion

- *Define the problem. Stick to the subject*. Don't throw in red herrings related to old issues, or external influences.
- *Stay in the "now"* - any previous issue, and any potential issue are not part of this discussion.
- *Hang in there*. Unless you are abused, - don't storm out, but do allow for a 'time-out' or deferment to an agreed time if emotions or practical matters are interfering with progress.
- *Practice give and take*. Be gracious and generous.

3. Resolve it

- *Put all your feelings 'on the table'⁴ – use 'I' messages*
- *Discuss how you each contribute to the problem.*
- *List past attempts which were not successful.*
- *List and evaluate possible solutions. Seek a win-win solution (see * below). Choose one to try.*
- *Discuss your progress regularly.*
- *Acknowledge, thank and reward each other when you see them making an effort.*

* To negotiate a win/win solution⁵:

- *Work out your goals and your partner's probable goals, what you agree on and what you disagree on. Think of ways to resolve what you disagree on in a win-win fashion.*
- *Build a relationship involving trust with the other person.*
- *Reach an agreement by confirming the other person's goals, what you agree on, and creative ways to resolve what you disagree on by both gaining what you want.*
- *Maintain the agreement, by maintaining commitment to the agreement and maintaining the relationship.*

4. Finish it off

- *Celebrate every victory.* Each time you resolve a conflict, make it memorable by making up enthusiastically, and have a date of some sort to celebrate.
(Composite Information from Neil Clark Warren⁶, John Bradshaw⁷, and PREPARE/ENRICH⁸)

HOW WOULD YOU BREAK AN IMPASSE?

When you just can't resolve a disagreement, or you think an issue is too big for the two of you, try the following:

- Pray (and fast if necessary);
- Write out all the points for and against;
- Seek advice from trusted people in a long stable marriage;
- Don't rush in - if no answer is coming, wait.

SAY IT WITH WORDS - WRITTEN DIALOGUE

You've probably heard the saying "Say it with flowers", which is a nice sentiment, and wives appreciate flowers occasionally. But that should not be looked on as an alternative to real communication, saying what you really mean. When an issue is really troubling you and you just can't seem to discuss it without emotions taking over, Written Dialogue is invaluable. In general terms, dialogue simply means two way communication, but written dialogue means a three stage process. (I suggest you use books for this). Decide first how long you plan to spend on it: 15 minutes writing and 15 minutes reading is the minimum recommended (we call that a 15/15 exercise, a 60/60 is really good communication, you could build up to that).

BUILD AND MAINTAIN INTIMACY

Maintain and build your intimacy by having regular dates; dating doesn't have to stop when you get married. A date doesn't have to be on a large budget, you can have intimacy walking in the park.

¹ Gary Smalley: *Homes of Honor* video series, 1997.

² James Osterhaus: *Questions Couples Ask Behind Closed Doors*, 1996.

³ John Gottman: The Gottman Institute

⁴ Bobbye & Britton Wood, in *Back to Basics*, Ian & Gerlinde Spencer, Threshold No 80, April 2004.

⁵ Ross Reck & Brian Long: *The WIN-WIN Negotiator*, 1987.

⁶ Neil Clark Warren: *The Triumphant Marriage*, 1995

⁷ John Bradshaw: *Bradshaw on the Family*

⁸ PREPARE/ENRICH: *Building a Strong Marriage*