

Handling Marital Conflict Seminar Handout

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"Contrary to popular belief, it's not how much you love each other that can best predict the future of your relationship, but how conflicts and disagreements are handled. Unfortunately, conflict is inevitable--it can't be avoided. So if you want to have a good marriage, you better learn to fight right." *Fighting for Your Marriage*

"David Olson of the University of Minnesota, who has studied over 15,000 married couples, recently said that 50% of married people will never be happy, unless they get unusually good therapy. Other researchers agree (Strean, 1985); about 30% of marriages are "empty shells"--little love, little talk, little joy. . . . Only about 25% of couples have "really good marriages." The remaining 25% could achieve a good marriage if they got therapy and/or really worked on obtaining the necessary skills via training or marriage enrichment (or, you can add, self-help). . . ."Olson believes the needed skills and characteristics are: communication skills, **conflict resolution skills**, compatible personality, agreement on values and religion, and good sex."

"Happiness is not the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with it."

These situations can in themselves cause conflict:

- If you felt pressured to get married.
- If you married someone not of your faith.
- If you got married because you were lonely or frustrated.
- If you married someone with a totally different view about life.
- If you only got married to fulfill your sexual hunger.
- If you got married for someone to fill your emotional or spiritual emptiness.
- If you got married to someone who is sexually experienced.
- If you got married so you can be a happy person,
- If you married someone with children from another relationship.
- If you married someone who is not as intelligent as you are.

A Key Cause of Marital Conflict "Surveys show that 80 percent of divorced couples in their twenties and thirties claim that financial problems were the major destructive factor in their marriages." *Winter 1997-98 issue of Stewardship Journal*.

84% of married couples say "Having children reduces our marital satisfaction." *Dr. David Olsen*

Arguing/Conflict affects women differently than men.

Ohio State University's Institute for Behavioral Medicine Research

". . . . Even after husbands and wives have stopped arguing, the battle may still be raging within the woman's body. It can do so for hours, altering her hormone levels and weakening her immune system to the point where illness could gain a foothold. . . . "This discovery, based on a long-running study of newlywed couples, is forcing researchers to rethink their understanding of marital conflicts. It could also have important implications for the physical, as well as emotional, health of married couples. . . . Earlier research suggested that men generally seek to "tune out" their wives during an argument, seeking to escape or withdraw from the conflict. Wives, on the other hand, are seen as being more likely to complain, criticize or demand change in a relationship. The husband's withdrawal is acutely frustrating to these women.

Blood analysis showed that among women who reacted negatively to their husbands' withdrawal during the arguments, the average levels of epinephrine, norepinephrine, cortisol and prolactin all rose. The more negative the wife's response and her husband's withdrawal, the greater the hormone level rise.

"If those hormone levels stay up long enough, it can have immune consequences," explained Ronald Glaser, professor of medical microbiology and immunology. Earlier work by Institute researchers has shown that psychological stress can cause weakened immune responses and a slowing of wound healing. . . . We're not saying that conflicts in marriage are bad necessarily. They're completely normal. It's the way the couples disagreed that was later related to a rise in hormone levels and a drop in immune function."

How satisfied are you with your conflict resolution as a couple? "

***"The way we handle the problems, more than the problems themselves,
often can be the problem."***

Top Five Stumbling Blocks Regarding Conflict Resolution. "Empowering Couples"

1. One person ends up feeling responsible for the problem.
2. I go out of my way to avoid conflict with my partner.
3. Differences never seem to get resolved.

4. We have different ideas about the best way to solve disagreements.
5. We have serious disputes over unimportant issues.

Four types of specific patterns of conflictual interaction that often lead to marital problems. *"Fighting for your Marriage"*

1. **Escalation** Escalation occur when partners negatively responds back and forth to each other, continually upping the ante so that conditions get worse and worse.
2. **Invalidation** Invalidation is a pattern in which one partner subtly or directly puts down the thoughts, feelings, or character of the other. Sometimes such as comments, intentionally or unintentionally, lower the self-esteem of the targeted person.
3. **Withdrawal & Avoidance**
4. **Negative Interpretations** When one partner consistently believes that the motives of the other are more negative than is really the case.

Anger *Rage, hatred, aggression, resentment, hostility.*

Conflict Resolution Styles *"Empowering Couples"*

1. **Pursuers** seek to created connections so they can become more intimate and close. Because talking and expressing feelings is important to them , the tend to feel rejected by their partner if the partner wants more space. When the partner . . . in their lives withdraws, pursuers will tend to pursue more intensely."
2. **Distancers** tend to be emotionally distant. They often manage stress by retreating into their work and may terminate a relationship when things become to intense. They are less likely to open up emotionally when they feel they are being pursued.
3. **Underfunctioners** typically have several areas in their lives in which they just can't seem to get organized. They tend to become even less organized when under stress. They have difficulty displaying their strong and competent side in intimate relationships.
4. **Overfunctioners** are quick to advise and help out when others are having problems. They often have difficulty showing their vulnerable , underfunctioning side.
5. **Blamers** tend to react to stress with emotional intensity and combative behavior. They like to change others and to put others down in order to make themselves look good.

What to do?

1. **Be Committed to Preserve Your Marriage Covenant:** The first rule in handling marital conflicts successfully is to be totally committed to preserving your marriage covenant. It is only within the context of a loving and irrevocable commitment that marital conflicts can be successfully resolved.
2. **Be Honest and Fair in Handling the Conflict**
3. **Be Willing to Forgive and to Forget**

The only way to bring a conflict which has gotten out of control to a satisfactory end, is for one partner to break the retaliation cycle by forgiving the other partner for the hurt received. In Christian marriages forgiveness must be patterned after the forgiveness Christ offers us.

Guideline for fair fighting: Fight by mutual consent, Stick to the present, Stick to the subject, Don't hit below the belt, Don't quit; work it out, Don't try to win, EVER, Respect Crying, Non violence

Techniques for fair fighting: Keep your anger under control. Set a time and place for discussion. Define the problem or issue of disagreement. Discuss before resolving. Talk about how each of you contributes to the problem. List past attempts to resolve the issue that were unsuccessful. Brainstorm ten new ways to resolve the conflict. Discuss and evaluate these possible solutions

"The goal of marriage is not to think alike, but to think together."