

Surviving the Marital Conflict Jungle



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**Virtually all couples have significant differences and disagreements.
Surviving can be difficult!!**

How we handle these disagreements can make the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship; between a functional marriage and a dysfunctional marriage

How we treat each other in marriage is a strong determinant of marital satisfaction. Couples need to **show patience, tenderness** and be **more light-hearted**

"I hate conflict ... I detest conflict ... Once it erupts, conflict is difficult to control. Love only endures when dissension is faced openly ... We cannot find personal intimacy without conflict ... Love and conflict are inseparable."

Robert Bolton "People Skills"

Marital Conflict

1. **Conflict is a natural, normal, unavoidable part of all relationships**
2. **Conflict doesn't just happen, it is created!!**
3. **Managing conflict in a constructive manner is challenging for the best of us.**
4. **The number one cause of divorce is not conflict but the avoidance of conflict**
5. **When conflict is avoided or suppressed it can be disruptive and destructive**
6. **Emotional connection is threatened when you stop listening to and respecting each other.**
7. **The quality of your marriage relationship isn't determined by how often you fight or what you fight about. What counts most towards marital happiness is **HOW YOU FIGHT!** It all depends on what you are saying and how you are saying it!**
8. **When conflict is dealt with effectively, you are able to reconcile your differences and intimacy deepens**

Common Sources of Marital Conflict

1. **Money, Sex, Communication**
2. **Relational and Family matters**
parenting; in-laws; work and leisure activities.
3. **Differences in Background or Family History**
cultural roles and values; showing empathy, affection, and appreciation; religion.
4. **Personality differences**
introvert/extrovert; self-disciplined; assertiveness; stress management.
5. **Gender differences**
differences in communication style; discrepancies in sexual desire.

Hidden Issues in Marital Conflict

Power - a struggle for control

Feeling unloved - needing greater security and care to facilitate greater connection

Recognition - helps couples feel valued for who they are!

Commitment - creates feeling of security

Integrity - questioning motives only undermines and invalidates

Acceptance - to be respected and accepted is the most basic hidden issue that drives all other issues

Howard Markman & Scott Stanley "*Fighting for Your Marriage*"

5 Responses to Marital Conflict

1. Fight - Attack; Contest; Out manoeuvre.

Always want to win; Finding fault; Keeping score; Being an attack dog

2. Flight - Withdraw; Denial; Avoidance.

3. Freeze - Become immobilized; Learned helplessness.

4. Give Up - Submission; Minimise; Overlook.

5. Face Up - Constructive problem-solving.

Conflict v's Problems

- **Problems** = disputes or differences of opinions, perspectives, goals or values
- **Conflict** = our inner response to real or imaginary external threats that endanger our status, identity and self-esteem

Newton Maloney

"Conflict creates emotional discomfort and most people slip into defensive, blocked, self-critical or self-protective postures".

The Two Components of Conflict

1. The Emotional Dimension

Emotional distress lies at the heart of conflict

Feelings of anger, defensiveness, fear, distrust, resentment, rejection quickly emerge

Too much hurt and negativity can become destructive and overwhelming

The need to acknowledge and deal with the hurt, pain, and anger

ANGER = "a strong feeling of displeasure excited by a real or supposed injury often accompanied by a desire to take revenge or to obtain satisfaction from the offending party."

Anger is a natural, normal, emotion

Anger is designed to warn and protect us by energizing us for action

Anger, when not managed constructively, can be a very destructive in a marriage relationship

Anger, when managed constructively, can be a resource that helps the marriage improve over time

Anger is a secondary emotion to protect you from further hurt and pain

2. The Specific Issue

Conflicting needs, values, goals, practices, roles

Divided into 2 categories

- **Solvable problems - able to be resolved**
- **Perpetual problems - 70% of marital conflict**

NB: Couples who fail to resolve issues, get gridlocked and become entrenched in "vicious cycles" of conflict, and feel psychologically overwhelmed or flooded

A Model for Conflict Resolution

1. Deal with emotion first

Acknowledge and validate each other's feelings

Actively listen with empathy don't interrupt, don't distance, don't judge

Respect each other - don't counterattack, blame, accuse, demean, insult

Calm yourself ("self-soothe") Learn your triggers

2. Discuss the problem

- Make a "soft start-up" – speak in a slow and quiet voice
- Admit that there is a problem – no denial
- Define the problem. Don't rush to find a "solution"
- Listen, understand & validate each other's point of view
- Clearly and briefly state your views, needs, feelings
- Don't monopolize the discussion
- Discuss one issue at a time – don't divert attention

- Watch the tone of your voice - don't be harsh, attack, or escalate, be congruent
- Remain open and flexible
- Stay connected

3. Solve the problem

Look at alternative solutions (brainstorm)

Generate options or alternate solutions?

- a. Leave underwear on the floor
- b. Wife picks up underwear
- c. Husband picks up underwear
- d. Fight over the issue
- e. Nail underwear to the floor
- f. Put underwear in the rubbish
- g. Hide dirty underwear
- h. Put underwear in the wash basket

4. Select the most appropriate solution and weigh up the possible consequences

5. Develop your action plan

6. Implement the plan

7. Evaluate the outcome, and the process used to get to resolution