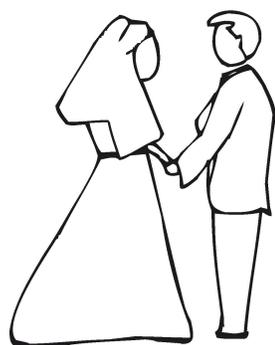


Skills for Handling Conflict



No relationship is perfect, and we are not born with the knowledge of how to handle conflict successfully. We must learn it. Because managing conflict is so important, it is essential that you practice certain skills. The following sections highlight some of the skills needed for dealing with differences and disagreements effectively.



Communicating Openly

Good communication can be difficult at times -- especially during conflict. People often hear a different message from the one the speaker intended. There are several possible reasons for this. First, spouses are often preoccupied with their own concerns or are preparing a rebuttal and do not really listen to what their partners are saying. Second, spouses may perceive their partners' messages negatively if they are tired or in a bad mood. Finally, different styles of communicating can also result in misunderstandings.

You can learn to communicate better by developing more effective ways of speaking and listening. It is important to take turns in a conversation so each partner can have the opportunity to express his or her thoughts and ideas. When speaking, focus on your own feelings and do not attempt to read your partner's mind. Be positive and avoid making accusations or criticizing your spouse.

When listening, be aware of your body language. Eye rolling, negative facial expressions, and crossing your arms may signal disapproval to the person who is speaking. Even if you do not agree with what your partner is saying, make an attempt to understand your partner's viewpoint and be respectful. Showing genuine interest in someone's feelings and not giving unsolicited advice go a long way toward creating an atmosphere of positive communication.

Here are some ideas for effective marital communication:

- When your spouse talks to you, try to understand his or her feelings.
- Give your partner both verbal and nonverbal feedback so he or she will know that you have understood what he or she meant.
- Be aware of the nonverbal messages you send when someone is talking to you, such as facial expressions or body posture. These can be very powerful!
- Don't make judgmental comments or jump to conclusions before your partner is done speaking.
- Show respect for your spouse's perspective, even if you do not agree with it.
- Take the time to really listen when your spouse needs to talk. Doing this will help him or her feel that you value his or her opinions and ideas.

- When you need to have an important discussion, remove distractions as much as possible so you can talk with each other more easily. For example, take a walk outside in order to get away from the telephone or talk in your bedroom where the children will not interrupt.
- Communicate clearly and directly so your partner will have a greater opportunity to understand you.
- When you are speaking, focus on expressing your own feelings, not trying to guess what your partner is thinking.

Controlling Negative Thoughts

The way a person treats others usually reflects the kinds of thoughts he or she has about them. This pattern holds true for spouses, especially during times of conflict. When partners focus on each other's shortcomings and weaknesses, they often fall prey to having negative thoughts about each other. This negative thinking makes it more likely that they will treat each other unkindly.

Suppose a wife comes home from work at the end of a long, hard day in a bad mood. Her husband is in the kitchen making dinner and calls out, "How was your day?" Instead of responding to his question, the wife snaps at him for having left his coat and briefcase on the kitchen table. How might the husband react? If he is in the habit of thinking positively about his wife and giving her the benefit of the doubt, he may think, "She must have had a really hard day." He might stop what he is doing and give his wife his full attention so he could try to find out what is really bothering her. However, if the husband takes offense at his wife's complaint and thinks, "Here I am, cooking dinner, and all she can do is criticize me," he will be more likely to respond negatively to his wife's complaint and further escalate the conflict.

Research supports these ideas about the power of one's thoughts. Marriage researchers have determined that stable marriages have more positive than negative interactions, while the

opposite is true for unstable unions. Because negative interactions are often fueled by one's thoughts, negative thinking can have a significant impact upon a relationship. In other words, people's thoughts often determine their actions. Therefore, it is very important for spouses to control the way they think about each other. Husbands and wives can do this during times of conflict by focusing on the troublesome issue instead of their partner's flaws. By keeping their feelings about the issue and their spouse separate, it is more likely that they will manage conflict better and have a healthier relationship.

Forgiving

Because there will be hurt feelings and conflict from time to time in every marriage, it is very important that spouses forgive each other when arguments and disagreements occur. Forgiveness enables partners to stay emotionally connected and keep their marriage positive. If people want their relationships to grow and become stronger, they must be willing to forgive their spouses whenever necessary. When spouses do not forgive each other, remain bitter, and hold grudges, they often experience physical and emotional problems. Thus, forgiveness is important to the individual health of each partner as well as to the health of the relationship.

Problem Solving

All couples will encounter problems in their marriage that will require problem solving skills. At these times, it is very important that the spouses work together as a team, instead of insisting on their point of view and working against each other. It is crucial to understand problems before attempting to solve them.

Problem solving is a much smoother process when spouses have discussed the issue thoroughly and each partner feels understood. Surprisingly, research has shown that after a good discussion about a troublesome issue, most people are so satisfied that there is no need to come up with a solution to the problem. Usually, peo-

ple just want the opportunity to express themselves and feel as if they have really been understood.

Of course, many problems still need to be resolved, even after open, productive discussion. Markman, Stanley, and Blumberg, a team of prominent marriage researchers, have identified an effective process for solving problems.

1. It helps to set a specific time to work on the problem so that partners can mentally and emotionally prepare. During the meeting, spouses should think of as many solutions to the problem as possible, ruling out nothing until all possible solutions have been presented.
2. The next step is to choose the solution, or combination of solutions, that will best solve the problem. It is likely that negotiation and compromise will be necessary at this step of the problem solving process.
3. After testing the chosen solution for an agreed-upon length of time, it is important for spouses to discuss the solution and whether the problem is being solved adequately. If not, adjustments should be made.

Not every issue that arises will require such an extensive problem solving process, but these steps can help couples solve their problems in a calm, controlled manner.

Changing Oneself First

It is common for husbands and wives to overlook their own weaknesses and focus instead on the faults of their spouse. In some marriages, one person feels that his or her partner is the cause of their marital problems and the only one who really needs to change in order for the relationship to improve. This may occasionally be true. However, in the vast majority of marriages, both partners make a contribution to the conflict and problems that arise.

It is crucial that spouses realize that the only person's behavior they can control is their own. In marriage, it is typical for partners to become annoyed or irritated with what they perceive to be their spouses' personal shortcomings, unusual habits and weaknesses. For example, a wife may feel upset because her husband arrives home from work late on a regular basis. Or, the husband may resent how his wife cuts him off in the middle of conversations. Frustration over shortcomings such as these often builds over time, motivating people to insist that their partners change. However, people usually end up discovering that their demands are not granted and their efforts to change their partners have failed.

Instead of trying to compel each other to change, it is more effective for partners to assess themselves honestly and think about what they can do to make the relationship better. Considering the contributions they make to disagreements and trying to overcome their own weaknesses will accomplish far more than dwelling on their spouses' faults. When husbands and wives stop trying to change each other and instead shift their attention to improving their own behavior, they will likely be more content, even if their partners continue to do the things that they do not like.

When spouses choose to make changes in themselves first, regardless of what their partner does, they are often surprised to find that the overall quality of their relationship improves dramatically. In an ideal situation, of course, both spouses continually strive to improve themselves and overcome their weaknesses. However, one spouse is often more committed to self-improvement than the other, at least for a while. Nevertheless, even if the other person does not feel a need to change himself or herself, the marriage will likely improve through the efforts of the one trying to change.

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