

Marital Conflict That Brings You Closer

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Conflicts are an inevitable part of any close relationship. Like friction, they can be helpful or hurtful, pleasant or unpleasant. Conflicts don't have to be a bad thing; they can actually be good for us. In fact, without them occurring occasionally, it is difficult to genuinely form a deep, passionate sense of connection between ourselves and our spouse. Proverbs tells us: "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

The problem usually is how we handle conflicts.

Do we avoid them because we hate conflict? This gives the impression of harmony but eventually leads to denial, deep resentments and emotional distance because we can't really talk about things that bother us.

Do we "snipe" at the other person or make sarcastic comments but rarely make progress on the issue?

Do we get into the "blame game" feeling like if he or she would change everything would be better?

So if conflict is inevitable and a good thing, **what is the goal of conflict?**

The goal is to create a "win-win" outcome that causes us to feel closer to the other person. Because when we feel understood, we feel more accepted for who we are...even if we disagree with each other.

Now, what are the best ways to have "Conflict that brings you Closer?"

Dr. John Gottman did a 20 year study nationwide to discover what made marriages last. In the area of conflict, he found that couples who did just 3 things, tended to stay together after 20 years of marriage.

1. They **turned toward each other** (instead of away) when they had problems.
2. They made **repair attempts** (or amends) after the conflict occurred.
3. They **allowed themselves to be influenced** by each other (rather than refusing to change).

So let's talk about the differences between what happens with couples who have conflicts and their marriage grows, and those who have conflicts but the marriage ends.

1. TURNING TOWARD

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When couples disagree about something and don't get a quick or satisfactory solution, They may: a) press harder and escalate to an impasse or worse or b) finally give up out of frustration.

Couples who give up are likely to feel pretty hopeless about their relationship & eventually turn away from each other.

Couples who continue to turn toward each other (and work on the issues) are more likely to see gradual progress and feel more hopeful.

2. REPAIR ATTEMPTS

The second thing that couples did who were still together after 20 years is that they made repair attempts. After a conflict with a spouse, most of us feel: 1) we either didn't mean to do anything on purpose to hurt their feelings, or 2) that they have done more to hurt us than we have to hurt them. So what do we do?

Most of us believe our partner should make things right between us because (in our minds), they were more at fault! Of course, they (unfortunately) are usually thinking the same thing – so we have two people who feel it is the other's responsibility to make up! The research indicated that when both people made repair attempts or amends, it made things better between them, and their marriages were more likely to last.

What are repair attempts? They are the things we do to let our spouse know we want our relationship to be better including 'small talk', a show of interest, asking about their day, or even an outright apology like "I'm sorry I reacted so badly."

In fact, I've found that the person who takes the initiative to make amends 1st, is usually the more mature of the two. (not the weakest or the one who loses ground)

3. ALLOWING OURSELVES TO BE INFLUENCED

When couples argue, most of us typically think we are Right and we may be to a point, but we communicate it in a way that usually makes our spouse feel that they are wrong.

The result is that we refuse to validate the other person's point of view until our point of view is acknowledged, which places us at odds or in a tug of war with each other.

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The truth isthat we may both be Right, but the impasse created causes us to “draw the line in the sand” - so neither is willing to budge, give and take, or genuinely consider the merits of the other’s position.

Couples who stayed married during the 20 year study were the ones who could

- 1) give credit where credit was due,
- 2) give a little- allow themselves to be influenced by their spouses – be it ever so slightly resulting in a joint solution, or a win-win vs a win-lose outcome they could both accept.

So if we really want to have conflict that brings us closer in our marriages, we have to:

- 1) learn to turn toward each other and keep on working on the issues
- 2) make repair attempts for what we have done
- 3) allow ourselves to be influenced toward a mutually acceptable solution

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