

Marital Conflict Resolution

Confrontations are unavoidable in marriage. But the most important factor in marital harmony isn't whether you get into a confrontation, but how you handle the confrontations. James gives us God's formula for handling marital debates: "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath" (James 1:19).

Three Don'ts of Conflict Resolution:

Here are three things from which to steer as you find yourself in inevitable marital conflicts.

1. Don't Practice Avoidance. Do you avoid all conflict with your spouse? Perhaps you are frightened of your spouse's anger. Perhaps you don't want to lose an argument or you're afraid an argument will ruin your marriage. Could it be that you're terrified you'll have to admit something about yourself that you'd rather keep silent? Or are you so afraid of seeing a problem inside yourself, that you just retreat?

Avoiding conflict never solves conflict; it only postpones the inevitable. You may stuff it and repress it, but your stomach will keep score. Don't practice avoidance. "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful" (Proverbs 27:6).

2. Don't practice appeasement. Some people don't avoid conflict; they appease. They automatically concede, in every discussion. One person always wins; one always loses. One person always dominates; the other simply gives in and gives ground. Godly compromise happens when both spouses give a little. But appeasement is something else. Appeasers may think they solve problems, but they don't.

Appeasement smolders in the heart like oily rags in a closet. They can break out and burn the house down. What's more, appeasers are given to self pity. They develop martyr complexes. They feel trapped because they know they'll never win. And while marriages with appeasers may stay together, they often suffer from emotional divorce, which is as tragic as physical divorce.

3. Don't practice aggression. You must face your partner, but don't attack. There are few problems husbands and wives can't solve if they will attack the problem, rather than each other. The Bible says, you must speak the truth in love (see Ephesians 4:15). To attack the problem, choose your time wisely.

Psychologists say that 90 percent of family arguments begin just before mealtime, when your blood sugar is low. Another time not to bring up problems is on the way to a social event or to church. "A soft answer turneth away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). The right time. The right tone. The right turf. All three are so important.

Three Do's of Conflict Resolution:

1. Practice accommodation. We all want our partners to change. But we need to focus on ourselves. The most effective way to change your partner is to change you. Because when you change, your partner has to react to someone different. To change yourself, practice accommodation.

Suppose a wife says, "My husband and I don't spend enough time together. He doesn't give me enough time." How can she accommodate her husband? She could learn a sport he loves - that they can play together. That way she gets what she deeply desires: time with her husband, but she does so by accommodating herself to him.

2. Practice acceptance. By practicing accommodation, you say, "I change." By practicing acceptance, you say, "My spouse might never change. I accept it. I accept my partner." There are simply certain things we have to accept about others. We're different.

In my wife's family, the Gentry household, there were never jokes and witticisms. In the Rogers' household, they flew back and forth all the time. I thought if you loved somebody, you showed that by teasing him or her. To Joyce, you say what you mean and mean what you say. Who's right? Nobody, of course. We're just different.

3. Practice adjustment. This is the best "do" of all. In accommodation, I change. In acceptance, I make up my mind to love my spouse despite the fact that he or she can't change. But in adjustment, we both change together. And when that happens, it's wonderful.

Joyce turns into a pumpkin about 9 p.m. The longer I go, the faster my engine runs, but it's hard to get the bed off my back in the morning! On the other hand, Joyce wakes up immediately and starts singing. Now what do you do when you have a lark and an owl married to each other? You practice adjustment.

Practice accommodation, practice acceptance and practice adjustment. Those are the ways to resolve conflicts.