

## **Proven Steps for Resolving Conflict in Marriage**

Statistics reveal that many marriages either dissolve or are robbed of intimacy and satisfaction because of the couple's inability to effectively resolve conflict. No matter how good your marriage is, at some point you will find yourself facing the reality that, sooner or later, every couple experiences conflict. The key is not to eliminate it, but rather to better understand your spouse's thoughts, feelings and desires, and learn how to communicate yours. The goal, of course, is to find a resolution that satisfies both partners and ultimately strengthens the marriage.

### **Roadblocks to Resolving Conflicts**

First, we need to identify some of the roadblocks to effective conflict resolution. The biggest potential roadblock is our attitude. Our attitudes can be severely impacted if we're holding onto unresolved anger and resentment. If we have not forgiven our self or our spouse (or anyone else, for that matter), we will never be able to maintain the open, caring attitude that's needed for genuine resolution.

Another roadblock to resolving conflict is a lack of skill in communication. Many people are unable to express their thoughts and feelings in a way that gets their point across clearly and respectfully - they just don't know how. This can result in anger and hurt feelings, even though there was no offense intended.

Communication is a combination of attitude and skill. An uncaring attitude combined with poor skill can result in abuse. An uncaring attitude combined with skill can result in manipulation. Someone with a caring attitude but no skill creates misunderstandings. However, when you combine a caring attitude with effective communication skills, you're on the road to healthy conflict resolution.

### **Three Keys to Effective Conflict Resolution**

In order for a couple to develop real understanding of each other they must understand the importance of the "three T's" - timing, trust and transparency. Let's take a look at the three keys.

They say, "Timing is everything," and in conflict resolution, it's true. If you need to talk with your spouse about an important issue, don't say the first thing that comes to your mind when either one of you is angry or upset. If necessary, say, "I need a little time," and specify a time that you'll agree to come together to calmly discuss your conflict with a goal of resolution, not revenge.

Trust - or a lack of it - will profoundly affect your ability to resolve conflict in your marriage. For effective resolution to take place, both people need to trust that the other one genuinely cares about the relationship and is willing to work at finding a resolution. When a relationship lacks trust, one partner may have to take the risk of choosing to trust, and be trustworthy, in order to begin the process of change. It's important to remember that Jesus taught us to love our enemies.

When resolving conflicts, it can also be risky to be transparent, but real communication can only take place if genuine feelings and honest thoughts are expressed. We're often reluctant to express feelings of hurt, resentment, fear, or insecurity because we know it makes us vulnerable. And we want to avoid being vulnerable out of pride or fear. It is important to remember that fear breeds avoidance and avoidance breeds more fear and if we do not face our fear it can turn into a self-defeating cycle of behavior. Being vulnerable can be scary, but intimacy and conflict resolution cannot occur without it.

As you learn the steps to effective conflict resolution, remember that you must practice them regularly in order to have them become a more natural part of your communication pattern. Learning a new pattern takes time - look for progress, not perfection!

Because marriage is a union of two individuals who have unique viewpoints, past experiences, frames of reference and values, conflict is inevitable. No two people can agree on everything all the time. However, there are certain strategies and guidelines that relate to conflict resolution specifically.

## Conflict Resolution Guidelines

- **Don't avoid conflict with the silent treatment or by acting out your emotions.**
- **Keep your resentments current.**
- **Be willing to accept responsibility for your mistakes.**
- **Give each other permission to call a "time out".**
- **Speak the truth in love.**

## Steps to Resolving Conflict

These steps are recommended for those issues that are considered, by one or both individuals, to be highly important, especially those that seem to surface on a regular basis and for those that typically result in emotional pain for one or both spouses.

### 1. Identify and define the conflict.

Let's look in on a couple that's working through a conflict.

**Wife:** "I've been paying the bills and balancing the checkbook for 18 years, but you don't even know where our money goes. I think you need to be more involved."

**Husband:** "I appreciate what you do, but I like just taking money out of our account whenever I need it. Sometimes I just need to know what our balance is, but when you just tell me we're getting close to our limit, that doesn't give me the information I need."

**Problem defined:** "We need to find a way to share the responsibility for our finances so all the pressure doesn't fall on one person's shoulders and so that both of us can be well informed with regard to where we are financially."

### 2. Agree to work through the conflict until resolution is reached.

**Agreement:** "After the kids are in bed tonight we'll talk about this issue - and, if necessary we will talk about it each night until we come up with a solution that works for both of us."

### 3. Explore your feelings about the issue.

Too often couples talk around their feelings or act them out instead of openly and honestly expressing them. When a person believes they've been heard and understood they will be ready to move forward in the process.

**Wife:** "I feel angry and resentful when I have to spend hours by myself paying the bills and balancing the checkbook while you're reading or playing with the kids. I also feel frustrated because you don't know how our money is spent or when we are getting close to our spending limit."

**Husband:** "I appreciate your hard work, but I feel annoyed and irritated when I ask you what our account balance is and you only give me a ballpark figure."

### 4. Identify what you want.

Many people find it easy to complain about what they **don't** want, but find it a challenge to clearly identify what they **do** want.

**Wife:** "What I want is for you to consistently help me manage our finances every month and to do it with a good attitude."

**Husband:** "What I want is to have a better understanding of where our money goes and to know what we have spent in each of our budget categories."

### 5. Generate options and possible solutions.

After both people clearly understand the conflict and the other person's perspective and feelings, they can begin listing possible solutions on paper.

**Wife:** "Let's sit down together the first and third Saturday of every month and pay our bills together. We can also discuss major purchases we might want to make as well as any adjustments we might need to make in our budget."

**Husband:** "I suggest we pay the bills together, but that you continue to write and mail out the checks to make sure they arrive on time."

#### **6. Choose actions that you will both take.**

Both individuals must commit to following through with some sort of action related to the agreed-upon resolution.

**Wife:** "I agree to schedule a time for us to do the bills twice a month. I will also continue writing and mailing the checks. I also agree to help you learn how to determine what our account balance is at any given time (for at least the first two months)."

**Husband:** "I agree to help you pay the bills twice a month, and if something comes up and we can't do it at our regular time, I will schedule another time that works for both of us. I will also take responsibility for recording each transaction in our check ledger. I also agree to learn how to tell what our account balance is (but it might take three months)."

#### **7. Evaluate the outcome and make changes if necessary.**

After you both have had time to follow through with the actions you agreed to take, evaluate your thoughts and feelings to decide whether or not the solution is effective.

**Agreement:** "We will try this plan for the next two months and then go out to dinner to discuss how our new plan is working and whether or not we need to make any changes."

At this point, the cycle can begin all over again if necessary, but each time, it will become easier and more productive if both people are committed to conflict resolution.

### **The Critical Component of Forgiveness**

What if your marriage has suffered from many years of unhealthy methods of dealing with conflict? We all know we can't change the past, but we can start fresh for the future. We need to begin by taking responsibility for our part in the conflicts. We need to be willing to say, "I was wrong, and I'm sorry. I know I hurt you and I don't want to hurt you again. Please forgive me." When you make a decision to forgive, you are free to begin a more healthy method of resolving conflict.

### **Guidelines for Resolving Conflict**

1. Speak the truth – don't exaggerate, lie, or confuse.
2. Stick to the issue at hand – don't drag out the dirty laundry.
3. Don't tell others "What's wrong with you..." or "Your problems is..."
4. When it's over, quit – don't fight old wars and don't keep bringing up the same things over and over.
5. Attack the issue/event, not the individual – focus on the act and not the person.
6. Don't hold it all in, express it – don't pretend that all is fine if it isn't.
7. Know when anger is approaching hostility or rage.
8. Know the right time to resolve a conflict – bad timing vs. good timing.
9. Agree to see the conflict through to resolution.
10. Keep your discussions confidential – sharing information with those not involved or able to resolve the issue is often just gossip.
11. Avoid absolutes and insults – always, never, idiot, jerk, etc.
12. Ask for clarification – "Did I hear you say...?"
13. Respond instead of react – think it through before you do!
14. Don't leave the other party in ruins – pick up the pieces.
15. Show compassion and empathy.
16. Make it a positive learning experience.
17. Choose to forgive and let go of offenses.
18. When wrong, admit it.
19. Remember that it is far better to be respected than to be right.
20. Strive for a win-win resolution.