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"Fighting Fair" in Marriage

This NebGuide presents steps to follow to recognize and resolve marital conflicts through negotiation and finding mutually agreeable alternatives.

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Do you ever use extreme or irrational tactics to gain your point (slamming doors, stomping around)?

Do you sometimes hurt your spouse in order to have the last word (sarcasm, name-calling)?

Do you store up grudges and use them to "hit" your partner over the head at a later time (revenge)?

Is your attitude "If I don't get what I want, I will quit cooperating?"

Do you continually expect others to do things the "right way" (your way)?

If you answered YES to any of the above, you are not "fighting fair," and are creating an interaction pattern of "I win, you lose." If this continues over a period of time, you will be setting into motion a hurtful, destructive method of responding to differences and resolving disagreements.

Most couples fight about some things, but many husbands and wives seem to differ about virtually everything and anything — which TV program to watch, where to go on vacation, how to discipline the children, how to spend money, who is going to work, what kind of chores each has to do, etc. Disagreement and conflict are part of the daily lives of many couples because marriage provides a fertile



ground in which the seeds of conflict can germinate.

Differences Lead to Choice-Points

When ignored or unresolved differences pile up, so do irritations and resentments. How well a marriage is working depends in part on how well a couple learns the skills they can use to negotiate and resolve their differences, and how satisfactorily they can close the emotional distance that has been created.

Failing to resolve the conflict situation may cause either person to disengage and retreat from the fight because it is simply "too hot." Married couples withdraw and create emotional distance between them by:

1. not talking to each other;
2. walking out in anger and slamming the door, implying that "when you come to your senses, we will talk";
3. one person finally giving in but seething with anger inside ("wait until next time"); and
4. withholding love and affection and other "positive strokes" from each other.

How can married couples fight more constructively to resolve their disagreements? By treating each other with respect, and by

1. learning appropriate rules of "fair fighting";
2. learning the "art" of negotiation;
3. coping with their anger; and
4. treating a disagreement as a choice-point for growth rather than an opportunity for a power struggle.

The Vicious Circle

Since the marriage relationship has the awesome ability to amplify the strengths and weaknesses in each individual's personality, conflicts often become vicious circles and the relationship degenerates into a power struggle. In the end, the marriage fails because neither partner's needs are met.

When the vicious circle of conflict dominates married life, each person feels angry, hurt, misunderstood and rejected. Neither is able to trust the other. The couple may slip into "playing games" with each other, such as "Look How Hard I've Tried (to make our marriage work)." "If It Weren't For You...(I would feel happier...)." Game-playing does not allow the couple to fight fair because each partner sees the other as an adversary — the one who is at fault and the one who should change. When this occurs, the couple has developed a "ritual impasse," in which they typically become stuck at the same point in every effort to make decisions and solve problems. The "stuck" husband, for example, might always block any conciliation attempt by predictably refusing to talk about it or being too tired after working so hard. This effectively destroys the problem-solving process between husband and wife and an impasse always will occur.

How To Wage Fair Fights (or "Healthy Battlefield" Rules)

If a couple is to move away from the temporary solutions of disengagement — of pouting and withdrawing or fighting and making up — to something more constructive and intimacy-producing, they need to agree to some rules and learn some negotiating skills. If not, there will just be an endless repetition of old wars that lead to "marital battle fatigue." Remember, mature couples can be in control

of the arguments rather than the arguments being in control of them.

Model of Resolving Conflicts in Marriage

1. *Recognize conflict issues.* No one has to look for conflicts, but if a disagreement arises, accept it as an opportunity to gain understanding of yourself and the other person. Consider it a time of growth. Your pessimism or optimism toward the problem issue will influence conflict resolution.
2. *Listen carefully to the other person.* Any changes desired by either spouse have to be heard and understood. If you listen to each other, you soon will notice that you begin to take each other seriously. If you are a true listener, others will begin to invite you as a guest into their life. Listen to others as you would have them listen to you.
3. *Select the most appropriate time.* It is very important to select a time that will allow for the greatest understanding and cooperative effort. If you are hungry, physically exhausted, emotionally upset, or have a limited time before an appointment, real problem solving should be postponed.
4. *Specifically define the problem or conflict issue.* Look for the relationship between the problem as you see it and the underlying basic psychological need from which it might have arisen. How does each of you define the problem? In your opinion, what behaviors contribute to the conflict? What behaviors do you think the other person sees as contributing to the conflict? What are the issues of agreement and disagreement in this conflict?
5. *Identify your own contributions to the problem.* In resolving marital conflict you basically are saying to another person that "we" have a problem. When you accept some responsibility for the problem, your partner perceives a willingness to cooperate and probably will be much more open to the discussion.

As you consider how you are going to discuss the problem together, here are some practical steps to follow:

- Choose one word that best indicates what you want to talk about.
- State the word or subject that you want to talk about in one complete sentence. Be precise and specific. Try not to blame, ridicule or attack your partner, and do not overload each other with too much information all at once.
- Take responsibility for the problem, and tell your partner the reason that you are bringing the matter up for discussion. For example, "I have a problem. I have something that is a little difficult for me to talk about, but our relationship is very important to me, and by talking about it I feel that we will have a better one. I feel that . . . is the problem, and this is what I am contributing to it. I would like to hear what you think and how you feel about it." Any statement similar to this is a very healthy way of expressing yourself and approaching what otherwise might be an explosive confrontation.

If your partner approaches you in this manner, respond by saying, "Thank you for telling me. If I understand, you think the problem is . . . I can agree that you think this way." Restate the problem to make sure you have correctly understood your partner.

Often, a marital conflict may be the result of a specific behavior of the other person. Take, for example, a situation in which one spouse does not pick up after himself. The other spouse may give this type of response: "Time after time I've asked you to pick up your things. Good grief!

You couldn't be this sloppy at work or you wouldn't keep your job. I'm sick of this. I'm not picking up one more item around here after you. What kind of an example are you giving to the children?"

Contrast that approach to the spouse who selects a proper time and approaches the other by saying: "John, I have a problem, and I feel that I need to talk to you about it, as it does involve our relationship. Perhaps I have not shared my real feelings with you, but I am bothered by our differences in neatness around the house. I would feel more accepting of you and less resentful if I felt you were helping by picking up your clothes in the morning and putting your work away from the night before. If this were done, I would feel better and actually have more time to . . . How do you feel about it?"

Most of us are not prepared for a calm, timed, rational approach to problem solving. And yet conflicts are a part of daily life, and you can learn procedures and statements such as this so they can be resolved.

As you discuss the problem, you must state as explicitly as possible what the other person's behaviors are that you find difficult to accept. You must also state as explicitly as possible your behaviors that the other person probably finds unacceptable.

6. *Identify alternate solutions.* Once each of you has identified your own contributions to a problem or conflict, it becomes clear that a behavioral change would be to everyone's advantage. The next step — the solution of the problem — is not always clear, however. Now is the time for individual and joint brainstorming. Each should think of as many solutions to the problem as possible. These should be behavioral changes both for yourself and for the other person. It is important to propose more than one alternative, as the greater the number of possible solutions the more likely you will find one that both will respond to and accept.
7. *Decide on a mutually acceptable solution.* After identifying all of the alternatives, evaluate them and make a choice. Your evaluation of each alternative should include: (1) the steps in implementation, and (2) the possible outcomes. What will be required for each person to effect a change by implementing a given alternative? How will the change affect the behavior of both individuals and their relationship?

If one spouse likes a certain solution but the other finds it unacceptable, discuss the reasons. Mutual sharing can promote growth and prevent feelings of rejection on the part of the one who suggested the alternative. Continue until you agree to try one solution to see if it works.

8. *Implement new behaviors.* Concentrate on your own behavior changes and allow your spouse to do the same.

After you have made the behavior changes mutually agreed upon, evaluate their effect on your relationship.

The Art of Negotiation

How does the married couple arrive at a mutually acceptable solution? By learning to negotiate, the couple learns a set of skills that will help them accomplish the adjustments or transcend the "stuckness." The steps involved for effective negotiation of behavior change are summarized as follows:

Step 1. Affirming loyalty to the marriage.

Both partners express their commitment to each other and agree to avoid distractors; they then move to *Step 2*.

Step 2. Assessment and clarification of needs.

After person *A* states what is wanted, person *B* can give three possible responses:

- a. Person *B* agrees to person *A*'s requests; person *A* clarifies what person *B* has said and moves to *Step 3*.
- b. Person *B* explains why things are the way they are; person *A* clarifies what person *B* has said and restates the original request, then moves to *Step 3*.
- c. Person *B* rejects person *A*'s request; person *A* clarifies what person *B* has said and moves to *Step 3*.

Step 3. Achieving conciliation.

Depending on what has happened in *Step 2*, conciliation is initiated by person *A* as follows:

For (a) agreement or (b) explanation, person *A* acknowledges that he or she must do something so that person *B* can give what person *A* requested.

For (c) rejection, person *A* communicates that a way needs to be found so that both person *A* and person *B* can get something they want.

Movement to *Step 4* occurs when both persons have identified some specific things each wants the other to do.

Step 4. Declaring what each will do and when.

Avoiding trade-offs, coercion, threats, rewards or punishments, person *A* states what he or she is willing to do and when, then listens to or asks person *B* what he or she is willing to do and when.

Results of Successful Negotiation

It is deeply discouraging to continue in a marriage that offers some good but mostly bad, and to feel that little, if anything, can be done to improve it. The chief outcome of successful negotiation is the confidence that things can be changed, problems can be worked out, and gradual improvement will appear. Aside from direct benefits that each gains from the agreement that emerges, successful negotiations allow both persons to observe themselves in a relationship that promotes rather than retards personal growth. This increases their desire to want to be with each other, which in turn contributes to the vitality and excitement of their marriage.

Alternative Strategies for Handling Disagreements

Let's assume that Diana and Bill have had a disagreement and have become "stuck" — have reached an impasse and distanced themselves from one another. Both find this situation very unsatisfying. What can they do?

Diana and Bill now have three possible choices. The first is *deference* — the willingness of one, as a gift of love, to end the disagreement by agreeing to the other person's choice. Deference is of two kinds: a loving gift freely offered, or a surrender demanded by coercion. When Diana demands that Bill give in and do it her way, she is in an "I win, you lose" game. Bill may give in, but likely will feel resentful and powerless. Greater distance is created and more barriers to intimacy are placed in their relationship. The first type of deference can be a very creative experience; the second is destructive. Deference should always be considered, but in many situations, it is not a genuine option.

The second choice is *compromise*. This means finding a meeting point at which each makes concessions to the other. Both lose something, and both gain something. Sometimes we call it "bargaining," which involves a *reciprocal exchange* so each person's needs are met. Agree on an experimental solution to be tried out and, if this doesn't work, the solution may be renegotiated.

There are some disagreements that cannot be resolved by either of these two methods. If this happens, the third choice is *coexistence*. This means a shared recognition that neither of the first two solutions is possible, and it will be necessary to live with the differences, at least for a time. Sometimes this is frustrating and even painful, but it must be accepted as a possible option.

There are two other possible ways of dealing with disagreements — both undesirable. One is to run away from the whole issue and refuse to face it. In that event, it will set up a state of irritation, which probably will produce further disagreements. The other alternative, as previously mentioned, is for one of the partners to use power to coerce the other into unwilling capitulation. This is always deeply damaging to a love relationship.

Summary

Couples can find an endless variety of things to disagree on. Virtually anything can become a problem. In particular, couples who are engaged in a struggle over the balance of power between them usually can find an arena for disagreement. Even couples who usually agree, and who have little or no power struggle between them, are bound at times to have differences that are important enough to fight for. The key to avoiding a destructive conflict is to keep in mind that the goal is to defeat the problem rather than to win the argument. Discussions that stick to the issues and avoid personal attacks have the best chances of producing positive results.

If, after several attempts of trying to "fight fair" — to follow the rules and guidelines presented here — you find yourselves continually "stuck" and at an impasse, or if one of you will not attempt to resolve your differences in respectful ways and slips into an "I win, you lose" behavior, you should select a competent marriage counselor to assist you. Because each person's ego is deeply involved in a marriage, it is difficult to be impartial and objective. A trained marriage counselor will help you to become partners, instead of adversaries, in your attempt to create a satisfying marriage, and in resolving day-to-day differences.

In a discussion of attitudes toward marital conflict and resolution, family therapist Israel Charney has written that "there is much to be gained from learning how to fight with one's spouse openly, saying what we feel and want, but not to the point of overwhelming one another." Conveying honest feelings openly and resolving differences of opinion constructively may be two of the most difficult challenges of marriage — but well worth the time and effort!

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