

Six Steps for Resolving Conflict in Marriage

There is no way to avoid conflict in your marriage. The question is: How will you deal with it?

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Few couples like to admit it, but conflict is common to all marriages. We have had our share of conflict and some of our disagreements have not been pretty. We could probably write a book on what not to do!

Start with two selfish people with different backgrounds and personalities. Now add some bad habits and interesting idiosyncrasies, throw in a bunch of expectations, and then turn up the heat a little with the daily trials of life. Guess what? You are bound to have conflict. It's unavoidable.

Since every marriage has its tensions, it isn't a question of avoiding them but of *how you deal with them*. Conflict can lead to a process that develops oneness or isolation. You and your spouse must choose how you will act when conflict occurs.

Step One: Resolving conflict requires knowing, accepting, and adjusting to your differences.

One reason we have conflict in marriage is that opposites attract. Usually a task-oriented individual marries someone who is more people-oriented. People who move through life at breakneck speed seem to end up with spouses who are slower-paced. It's strange, but that's part of the reason why you married who you did. Your spouse added a variety, spice, and difference to your life that it didn't have before.

But after being married for a while (sometimes a short while), the attractions become repellents. You may argue over small irritations—such as how to properly squeeze a tube of toothpaste—or over major philosophical differences in handling finances or raising children. You may find that your backgrounds and your personalities are so different that you wonder how and why God placed you together in the first place.

It's important to understand these differences, and then to accept and adjust to them. Just as Adam accepted God's gift of Eve, you are called to accept His gift to you. God gave you a spouse who completes you in ways you haven't even learned yet.

We were no exception. Perhaps the biggest adjustment we faced early in our marriage grew out of our differing backgrounds. I grew up in Ozark, Missouri, a tiny town in the southwestern corner of the "Show-Me" state. Barbara grew up in a country club setting near Chicago and later in Baytown, Texas. Barbara came into our marriage a refined young lady. I was a genuine hillbilly.

It was as though we came from two different countries with totally different traditions, heritages, habits, and values. The differences became apparent early in our marriage. Take furniture, for

example. Barbara had an Ethan Allen dream book and she was always looking at it. It was full of things made of solid cherry, solid walnut, solid mahogany. It was nothing for chairs to cost \$189.95—per leg.

I didn't understand why she wanted to go buy this kind of stuff when, in southwest Missouri, you could go to K-Mart and get a formica table with chrome legs and *six* chairs! And for a lot less than \$189.95. You can eat off that kind of table for years and it will never show any wear.

So, how did we compromise? We bought an antique and I was expected to refinish it—which created an opportunity for another major difference in our backgrounds to surface. Barbara's father was an engineer. He is mechanically gifted, can fix anything, and actually enjoys it. I'm convinced he could fix a nuclear reactor.

My dad had a background in sales. Fixing things was not his idea of fun. If bailing wire or a little duct tape wouldn't work, he usually called the plumber or whatever repairman was necessary.

And so there we were, just married, with an antique table that needed refinishing. I went at it reluctantly, but I got it done. In some ways it saved our marriage in the early going.

Step Two: Resolving conflict requires defeating selfishness.

All of our differences are magnified in marriage because they feed what is undoubtedly the biggest source of our conflict—our selfish, sinful nature.

Maintaining harmony in marriage has been difficult since Adam and Eve. Two people beginning their marriage together and trying to go their own selfish, separate ways can never hope to experience the oneness of marriage as God intended. The prophet Isaiah portrayed the problem accurately more than 2,500 years ago when he described basic human selfishness like this: “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). We are all self-centered; we all instinctively look out for number one, and this leads directly to conflict.

Marriage offers a tremendous opportunity to do something about selfishness. We have seen the Bible's plan work in our lives, and we're still seeing it work daily. We have not changed each other; God has changed both of us. The answer for ending selfishness is found in Jesus and His teachings. He showed us that instead of wanting to be first, we must be willing to be last. Instead of wanting to be served, we must serve. Instead of trying to save our lives, we must lose them. We must love our neighbors (our spouses) as much as we love ourselves. In short, if we want to defeat selfishness, *we must give up, give in, and give all*. As Philippians 2:1-8 tells us:

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

To experience oneness, you must give up your will for the will of another. But to do this, you must first give up your will to Christ, and then you will find it possible to give up your will for that of your spouse.

Step Three: Resolving conflict requires pursuing the other person.

Romans 12:18 says, “If it is possible, as much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” The longer I live the more I realize how difficult those words are for many couples. Living peaceably means pursuing peace. It means taking the initiative to resolve a difficult conflict rather than waiting for the other person to take the first step.

To pursue the resolution of a conflict means setting aside your own hurt, anger, and bitterness. It means not losing heart. My challenge to you is to “keep your relationships current.” In other words, resolve that you will remain in solid fellowship daily with your spouse—as well as with your children, parents, coworkers, and friends. Don’t allow Satan to gain a victory by isolating you from someone you care about.

Step Four: Resolving conflict requires loving confrontation.

Wordsworth said, “He who has a good friend needs no mirror.” Blessed is the marriage where both spouses feel the other is a good friend who will listen, understand, and work through any problem or conflict. To do this well takes loving confrontation.

Confronting your spouse with grace and tactfulness requires wisdom, patience, and humility. Here are a few other tips we’ve found useful:

- Check your motivation. Will your words help or hurt? Will bringing this up cause healing, wholeness, and oneness, or further isolation?
- Check your attitude. Loving confrontation says, “I care about you. I respect you and I want you to respect me. I want to know how you feel.” Don’t hop on your bulldozer and run your spouse down. Approach your spouse lovingly.
- Check the circumstances. This includes timing, location, and setting. Don’t confront your spouse, for example, when he is tired from a hard day’s work, or in the middle of settling a squabble between the children. Also, never criticize, make fun of, or argue with your spouse in public.
- Check to see what other pressures may be present. Be sensitive to where your spouse is coming from. What’s the context of your spouse’s life right now?
- Listen to your spouse. Seek to understand his or her view, and ask questions to clarify viewpoints.
- Be sure you are ready to take it as well as dish it out. You may start to give your spouse some “friendly advice” and soon learn that what you are saying is not really his problem, but yours!

- During the discussion, stick to one issue at a time. Don't bring up several. Don't save up a series of complaints and let your spouse have them all at once.
- Focus on the problem, rather than the person. For example, you need a budget and your spouse is something of a spendthrift. Work through the plans for finances and make the lack of budget the enemy, not your spouse.
- Focus on behavior rather than character. This is the "you" message versus the "I" message again. You can assassinate your spouse's character and stab him right to the heart with "you" messages like, "You're always late—you don't care about me at all; you don't care about anyone but yourself." The "I" message would say, "I feel frustrated when you don't let me know you'll be late. I would appreciate if you would call so we can make other plans."
- Focus on the facts rather than judging motives. If your spouse forgets to make an important call, deal with the consequences of what you both have to do next rather than say, "You're so careless; you just do things to irritate me."
- Above all, focus on understanding your spouse rather than on who is winning or losing. When your spouse confronts you, listen carefully to what is said and what isn't said. For example, it may be that he is upset about something that happened at work and you're getting nothing more than the brunt of that pressure.

Step Five: Resolving conflict requires forgiveness.

No matter how hard two people try to love and please each other, they will fail. With failure comes hurt. And the only ultimate relief for hurt is the soothing salve of forgiveness.

The key to maintaining an open, intimate, and happy marriage is to ask for and grant forgiveness quickly. And the ability to do that is tied to each individual's relationship with God.

About the process of forgiveness, Jesus said, "For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions" (Matthew 6:14–15). The instruction is clear: God insists that we are to be forgivers, and marriage—probably more than any other relationship—presents frequent opportunities to practice.

Forgiving means giving up resentment and the desire to punish. By an act of your will, you let the other person off the hook. And as a Christian you do not do this under duress, scratching and screaming in protest. Rather, you do it with a gentle spirit and love, as Paul urged: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Step Six: Resolving conflict requires returning a blessing for an insult.

First Peter 3:8-9 says, "To sum up, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing."

Every marriage operates on either the “Insult for Insult” or the “Blessing for Insult” relationship. Husbands and wives can become extremely proficient at trading insults—about the way he looks, the way she cooks, or the way he drives and the way she cleans house. Many couples don’t seem to know any other way to relate to each other.

What does it mean to return a blessing for an insult? Chapter three of 1 Peter goes on to say “For, ‘the one who desires life, to love and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. He must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it’” (verses 10-11).

To give a blessing first means stepping aside or simply refusing to retaliate if your spouse gets angry. Changing your natural tendency to lash out, fight back, or tell your spouse off is just about as easy as changing the course of the Mississippi River. You can’t do it without God’s help, without yielding to the power of the Holy Spirit.

It also means doing good. Sometimes doing good simply takes a few words spoken gently and kindly, or perhaps a touch, a hug, or a pat on the shoulder. It might mean making a special effort to please your spouse by performing a special act of kindness.

Finally, being a blessing means seeking peace, actually pursuing it. When you eagerly seek to forgive, you are pursuing oneness, not isolation.

Our hope

As difficult as it is to work through conflict in marriage, we can claim God’s promises as we do so. Not only does God bless our efforts based on His Word, but He also tells us He has an ultimate purpose for our trials. First Peter 1:6-7 tells us,

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

God’s purpose in our conflicts is to test our faith, to produce endurance, to refine us, and to bring glory to Himself. This is the hope He gives us—that we can actually approach our conflicts as an opportunity to strengthen our faith and to glorify God.

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