

You Didn't Sign Up For This

Introduction. Most couples, even happily married ones, are no strangers to conflict. And many of them have had to battle back to make their houses places where they love being home. Unbelievably, the adversity has the potential to grow you closer.

Couples who file for divorce face many reasons — a failing business, the loss of a loved one, or a child that takes extra care. But now, add COVID-19, a big disruption of daily life, and huge economic loss, and you've got a lot of opportunity for conflict.

Maybe you find yourself in an unhappy marriage. Maybe you're unhappy because you've drifted apart, you've lost the passion, you're stuck in what seems like endless conflict, or maybe one of you have had an affair. For whatever reason, you're desperately frustrated with your unhappiness.

This unhappiness can take different forms. Maybe your husband stores up all his anger from work and dumps it when he gets home. He's always frustrated and venting. Maybe your wife gets exhausted being with the kids and starts drinking wine before dinner. Then she zones out and blows you off. Maybe your spouse knows how worried you are about the finances, but goes out and spends anyway.

Peter told husbands (and the same would hold true for wives) to dwell with their wives in an understanding way (1 Peter 3:7). "Understanding" is variously translated as "according to knowledge," "respect," "consideration," and "honor." How can you live with each other with more knowledge? How do you fight for your marriage when so much threatens to take it down? I'd like to share four practical strategies to make your time with your spouse better, not worse.

I. Create The Calm You Crave

- A. Have you ever heard of "family voice" — the irritated, demanding, rushed, and sometimes half-panicked voice you find yourself using at home and pretty much no where else? When you're under pressure, your "family voice" comes out of nowhere. Even the best of us risk losing civility under stress.
- B. But in your marriage, kindness and peace can take you much further than cursing, a hateful tone, and throwing things (Proverbs 18:21). There's no better time to start creating the calm inside your relationship than right now.
- C. This means learning how to communicate. The following are three ideas:
 1. Avoid the "blame and shame" game.
 - a) A dead giveaway that you and your spouse are playing the blame-and-shame game is the language: "You always ..." or "You never ..."
 - b) This sticks you in repeating patterns of criticism and defensiveness. This normally turns into "fighting dirty" — using belittling or critical put-downs to get the other to surrender to your own perspective.
 - c) There are no neutral or empty words. They have power. The words we use with our spouses will either build us up or tear us down.
 2. Stop thinking your way is the only way.
 - a) Communication sometimes devolves into defending our view or proving a point rather than figuring out the next steps that would lead to a mutually acceptable solution.

- b) Have you ever heard that it's more important to do right than to be right? Doing right involves a lot of listening. It also involves being able to accept with humility that your way isn't the right way all of the time.
 - c) Doing right means responding with kindness and respect even when you don't agree with what your spouse is saying. You've likely already realized there are more than two solutions to almost every problem you face. Approaching the issue with an open mind will help you identify more potential solutions. You can't see those solutions when you're focused on fighting for "my way."
3. Fight for "we" instead of "me."
- a) There is value to keeping your relationship strong over the value of satisfying your individual desires. Strong couples compromise some of their wants for the sake of their connection with each other.
 - b) Will you fight for unity or fierce independence? If you know your spouse will be unhappy with a particular choice, do you push for it? A choice that leaves the other person unsatisfied is an unacceptable choice.
 - c) To keep fighting for "we," when things are getting heated, remember this: if I win, we lose. How can we both win?
- D. The hardest victory is victory over self (Proverbs 29:11; 16:32; 25:28). Make it your goal to air your differences, at least the ones that provoke your emotions, only when you're calm and clear-headed. We all need the mind of Christ, and He was calm under duress (Philippians 2:5; cp. Mark 4:39; John 18:1-6). Don't expect others to create the calm you crave. Lead the way.

II. Love Their Way, Not Yours

- A. Dr. Gary Chapman developed the concept of love languages back in 1992. Your love language is the primary way love is communicated to or received by you as an individual. Dr. Gary Chapman has identified five of them: acts of service, words of affirmation, physical touch, gifts, and quality time. Chances are, your love language and your spouse's are not the same.
- B. Here's how different they can be.
- 1. A husband, after emptying the dishwasher, might say something like, "Look what I did — for you!" And while his wife would appreciate it, his act of helping with chores doesn't really resonate with her.
 - 2. But the wife might say, "Hey, let's clear an evening so we can really talk," or "Let's go for a long walk on my favorite trail." While her husband is usually obliging, these things don't mean the same to him as they do to her.
 - 3. A couple learns that quality time and physical touch are the love languages that speak to the wife, while the husband's primary languages are acts of service and words of affirmation.
- C. Are we going to do the actions that we can predict will make each other happy? It's easy to become complacent. Loving your mate in their love language needs to be consistent. You will tend toward showing love to your spouse in the way that you want it shown to you. However, you have to think: who are you trying to show love to? You or your spouse?
- D. Why not experiment with ways to strengthen your bond?

1. Maybe you could set aside an entire afternoon to clean – deep clean – your house, and send your husband into a spasm!
 2. To be fair, you probably won't start the day off feeling particularly happy about a day of cleaning, but you'll end up being pleasantly surprised.
- E. All of this is to say: speak your partner's love language, not yours. This is just a more layered way to demonstrate the characteristics of 1 Corinthians 13:4-7. Husbands and wives are both commanded to love each other (Ephesians 5:25; Titus 2:4). Jesus wanted His disciples to be as shrewd as snakes and as harmless as doves in Matthew 10:16.
1. Perhaps we need to consider being that way in the manner we show love: I'm going to show love as wisely as I can while being as innocent or harmless as I can.
 2. And remember: for marriage newbies and veterans alike, becoming more loving is a marathon, not a sprint. Perseverance is needed.

III. Pay Attention To Your Mate's Emotions But Manage Yours

- A. Your ability to be in tune your spouse's emotions, whether sadness, anger, or joy, answers a deep question in marriage: "Will you be there for me?"
1. Being present in the sad and down moments as well as the enjoyable ones builds trust.
 2. If your spouse is attuned to your emotions, you're more likely to believe that your spouse has your best interests in mind. And, you are more likely to dwell on the positive and forget the negative aspects of your relationship.
- B. Creating an atmosphere of being honest about your emotions, and accepting of each other's raw emotions, is key to developing a stronger bond. Once a person decides to genuinely understand and work with a spouse's emotions, it is possible to get better and better at this skill.
- C. I've sadly seen too many couples that are just emotionally distant from one another. You can tell they're not close at all. They may not be angry or yelling, but they're certainly not soulmates. And maybe that's a result of all the negativity, complaining, put-downs, and just generally making each other feel small and worthless. Don't let the "corrupt words" come out of your mouth (and I don't just mean cursing). "Impart grace" to your spouse (Ephesians 4:29; Colossians 4:6).
- D. You see, although all emotions are acceptable, all behaviors are not.
1. Ephesians 4:26 says God made us with emotion, and He knows there are times when we are going to be angry. This is especially true in a marriage where our feelings and emotions are most vulnerable and exposed.
 2. "Angry" is a permissive imperative. God says, "I permit you to be angry, but I do not permit you to sin." This principle goes back to the first principle in every marriage which is to act like a Christian. You've got to acquire the skill of managing how you respond to strong emotions such as anger so that everyone stays safe and well.
 - a) While the circumstances aren't entirely similar, David had two opportunities to kill Saul (1 Samuel 24:4; 26:8). But he wouldn't do it

because he knew it wasn't the will of God. He demonstrated tremendous self-control in not harming his enemy.

- b) Now I don't want you to think of each other as your enemy, but it's sure easy to use your emotions to hurt each other. The ability to be angry, but not sin, comes from the power of the gospel. The last fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:23 is self-control (cp. Titus 2:11-12; 2 Peter 1:6).
- E. Because marriage can so be tricky and challenging at times, it's only natural that when you're in a funk, you begin to ask, "Did I marry the right person?" It's the holidays, and naturally emotions will run high and we will all be tested to our breaking points. While we're on the subject of emotions, I'd like to take a deep breath and give you some signs that you actually did in fact, marry Mr. or Mrs. Right, and, most importantly, you can get through difficult times together.
 1. You spend time together doing things you both enjoy.
 2. You can also spend time apart.
 3. They're attentive.
 4. You have strong trust.
 5. They're physically affectionate.
 6. They don't expect you to change overnight.
 7. You put the other person first.
 8. Your fights are productive, not destructive.
 9. You help each other become more successful.
 10. You can make each other laugh.
 11. They listen more than they talk (and vice versa).
 12. You never hesitate to ask for help.

IV. Don't Just Pay Lip Service To Counseling

- A. Preachers and elders are men who care about you and your marriage. They're there to help you navigate the rough patches between you and your spouse — for free.
 1. The four men you have chosen to be your elders have, believe it or not, about two hundred years of accumulated experience and wisdom, and can lead you through the biblical principles you need to restore your marriage.
 2. Couples may bristle at and resist this, but I need to get this point across: the Bible says it's very wise to listen to counsel (Proverbs 11:14; 13:10; 15:22). If you're prideful, stubborn, rebellious, apathetic, or whatever, why don't you be wise and ask for help?
- B. However, couples sometimes need help beyond what friends and other Christians can provide.
 1. It's not that you're defective or incapable, or that the people you've asked to help (friends, elders, preachers) are incapable.
 2. But sometimes couples need professional help to sort out the complexity of the conflict between them. Having an experienced professional to work with means that they are able to move past disagreements and start taking baby steps in a better direction.

- C. Whichever route you choose, your relationship will not be transformed quickly. But over the years you can leave your unhappiness, and not each other, behind. Needless to say, you're going to be thrilled.
1. I've found that most of the time when couples tell me that they've tried marriage counseling, they've went once or twice. Then, someone got offended (they heard what they didn't want to hear) or frustrated or afraid of the cost, and quit.
 2. Attempting to counsel once or twice to resolve a complex relational problem that's likely existed for years doesn't cut it. And paying for marriage counseling will cost a lot less than a divorce.
 3. The advice you'll receive in counseling will be invaluable to the process of transforming your relationship (Proverbs 20:5). Making progress on one issue will encourage you to tackle other areas.
 4. In the end, couples who find someone with a track record of helping couples strengthen their marriages never regret a single minute, effort, or dollar they invest in getting advice to save theirs.
- D. I'm so taken aback by the way Jesus treated Peter in Luke 22:31-32. He essentially said, "I know you're going to fail." But He also gave Peter a charge to strengthen others when he returned. I suppose every couple knows what it's like to go through hard times, and then they're in the position to help others make it through hard times — but only if they're allowed the chance.

Conclusion. With the uncertainty that couples constantly face, we need each other, and we need hope more than ever. Couples who are mired in unhappiness and conflict can't see through to the fact that a lot rides on them staying together.

When you sign up for a long-term relationship like marriage or parenting, like it or not, you signed up for some trouble. But you also signed up for more love, more life, and more joy. And that's exactly what I hope for you. Will you let Jesus stir hope in you? He said, "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Maybe you need to go home and have a serious talk with your spouse. Some contriteness and apologizing may be necessary. Pray together and become stronger instead of ignoring and avoiding each other. Taking steps to become more spiritual will never be time wasted.

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