

Marriage and Conflict



turning
disagreement
into growth

by Sheryl DeWitt, Mitch Temple, Romie Hurley, Wilford Wooten and Phillip J. Swihart



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*This booklet is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Sheryl DeWitt
who passionately committed herself to strengthening families.*

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Introduction

Most marriages start with the delight of “being in love” and honeymoon excitement. The question is “what happens next?” Does bliss lead to adjustment, compromises and learning to really love another person who may have very different needs and expectations? Or does it give way to poorly handled conflict, power struggles and deepening frustration and resentment?

One young woman put it this way about her marriage: “I thought the first year would be wonderful. It was hell.” She was just beginning to have a glimmer of hope that she and her husband would crawl out of that hole.

It can be a shock to find that neither of you seems to have any conflict management skills. As one comedian noted, “My wife and I never fight; we just have moments of intense fellowship.” Instead of dealing constructively with the inevitable disagreements found in any marriage, you may quickly devolve into blaming, yelling and withdrawing—a toxic cocktail that can send a marriage spiraling downward.

Disagreements arise over all kinds of things—fi-

nances, sex, priorities, in-laws, pregnancy, parenting and even the spiritual dimension of your life together. Many couples didn’t discuss these issues when they were dating—resulting in conflicts that may leave lasting scars in the relationship.

Dealing with conflict takes time and effort. We live in a fast-food culture with a sense of entitlement to having everything happen on demand. But marriage doesn’t work that way.

The apostle Paul advised readers to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). As Bible teacher Alistair Begg has noted, we need to do the same in our marriages. Many spouses are blindsided by the complexities of married life, having assumed they instantly and naturally know all they need to know about making a relationship work. Begg suggests that we should expect to work out the marriage relationship “with fear and trembling” rather than being cocky and deluded by the notion that it will all come easily.

This is a booklet about working things out—trembling or otherwise. In the pages to follow you’ll find



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answers to questions about conflict commonly asked by married couples. You'll probably find some issues you're struggling with. It's our hope and prayer that this book will be a source of help and encouragement on your journey.

—Wilford Wooten and Phillip J. Swihart

Is It OK to Fight?

In a word, no.

That assumes “fighting” isn't just disagreeing and expressing negative emotions. Those things are inevitable in a marriage. But if fighting is trying to resolve those feelings and problems through abusive behavior, it's unhealthy.

Conflict occurs when two people have a difference of opinion that hasn't been resolved. This can happen when you and your spouse disagree over where to go for dinner, whose family to spend the holidays with or what each person's chores were this week. All of these are normal marital conflicts that can be worked out.

When arguments turn into verbal or physical abuse, though, it isn't healthy for any marriage. If you consistently attack your spouse with statements like, “I'm sorry I married you,” “You are so stupid,” and “I hate you,” you've moved from arguing to abusing.

If you throw things at your spouse—pillows, silverware, pictures, vases—it only leads to more conflict and hurt. And you never hit, push, shove, kick or spit at your spouse. This is physical abuse. Not only is it immoral and illegal, but it causes tremendous damage to your relationship. If this is the way you deal with conflict, you need to seek counseling to learn appropriate ways to reconcile.

Those appropriate ways don't include simply submerging your differences instead of dealing with them honestly. Many couples try to sidestep or hide their conflict because disagreements can be painful. That leads some spouses to think their own arguments are abnormal.

“I never see other couples fight,” Gary told a friend. “It makes me feel like Katie and I have a bad marriage.” Gary doesn't realize that some couples





share their conflicts openly, while others are more private. Some couples appear to have no conflicts, but in time they often have distress in their marriages because they have just internalized conflict and allowed hurt and resentment to build. Their anger may explode, doing incredible damage to the relationship.

A husband we'll call Paul was one who tried to suppress conflict because he feared fighting. "I fell in love with Lucy because we never fought before we got married," he told his accountability group. "I am so afraid of divorce because of my parents. They fought all the time and look where it led them. If Lucy and I continue to fight, I'm afraid we'll end up like my folks."

Contrary to what Paul believed, divorce is most common when conflict is hidden or unresolved—not when it's dealt with openly. Conflict in itself doesn't lead to divorce. Lack of resolution has brought divorce at worst and unhappy marriages at best.

Conflict resolution may sound complicated, but it's possible. It's a skill that requires the commitment of both spouses and can be refined with practice.


Here are 10 things to remember about resolving

conflict without fighting.

1. *Deal with disagreements as soon as possible.* Confront issues as they arise. The longer a conflict stews, the larger the issue becomes; time tends to magnify a hurt. As the Bible says, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold" (Ephesians 4:26).
2. *Be specific.* Communicate clearly what the issue is. Don't generalize with words like "never" or "always." When you're vague, your spouse has to guess what the problem is. Try something like, "It frustrates me when you don't take the trash out on Mondays," rather than, "You never do what you say you're going to do."
3. *Attack the problem, not the person.* Lashing out at your spouse leaves him or her hurt and defensive. This works against resolving conflict. Your goal is reconciliation and healing in your relationship. Let your mate hear what the problem is from your point of view. Say







something like, “I’m frustrated that the bills didn’t get paid on time,” instead of, “You’re so irresponsible and lazy. You never pay anything on time.”

4. *Express feelings.* Use “I” statements to share your understanding of the conflict: “I feel hurt when you don’t follow through.” “It makes me angry when you tease me in front of your friend.” Avoid “you” statements like, “You’re so insensitive and bossy.”
5. *Stick with the subject at hand.* Most people can deal with only one issue at a time. Unfortunately, many spouses bring two or three issues to an argument, trying to reinforce their point. This confuses the confrontation and doesn’t allow for understanding and resolution. It’s better to say, “It hurt my feelings when you didn’t include me in your conversation during dinner with our friends,” rather than, “You never include anyone, you always think of yourself. Whenever we’re with other people, you always ignore me. Everyone

thinks you’re selfish.”

6. *Confront privately.* Doing so in public could humiliate—or at least embarrass—your spouse. This will immediately put him or her on the defensive and shut down any desire to reconcile.
7. *Seek to understand the other person’s point of view.* Try to put yourself in your spouse’s shoes, an exercise that can lead to understanding and restoration. That’s what Mia was doing when she told her sister, “Jeff had a hard day at the office today. His boss chewed him out. That’s why he’s quieter than normal, so I didn’t take it personally. I know when I’ve had a hard day, I need time for myself, too.”
8. *Set up a resolution plan.* After the two of you have expressed your points of view and come to an understanding, share your needs and decide where to go from here. That might mean saying something like, “In the future, it would help to discuss with me how we’ll spend our savings—rather than telling me

after the fact.”

9. *Be willing to admit when you're wrong.* Sometimes a conflict occurs because one person's behavior was inappropriate. Be willing to confess and ask forgiveness from your spouse if you've wronged her or him. That process can help to heal the damage in your relationship. Try something like, "I'm sorry I was unkind to you. Will you please forgive me?" If you're the offended spouse, be gracious enough to accept your spouse's apology.
10. *Remember that maintaining the relationship is more important than winning the argument.* Winning an argument at the expense of losing the relationship is a defeat for both of you. Finding a solution that benefits both spouses lets everybody win.

What if the two of you just can't seem to find that solution? When you can't get past a specific conflict, seek the help of a counselor.

Fighting isn't healthy, but conflict isn't always bad.

In fact, it can be a tool for strengthening relationships. When conflict is handled correctly, two people share their hearts with each other, trying to listen and be heard while connecting on a deep level. When you deal with conflict in a caring and positive way, the result can be a deeper relationship and greater intimacy.

“In your anger do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26). God knew that we'd have anger and conflict in our relationships. But anger isn't a sin as long as we seek to resolve the conflict.

“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). Instead of fighting, are you doing your part to reconcile and restore your relationship with your mate?

—Sheryl DeWitt

How Can We Work Out Disagreements?

Whether you've been married five years or five months, you've had disagreements with your spouse. *Having* them is not the issue. The real issue is whether



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you can deal with them in a healthy way or not.

Destructive patterns of disagreement can leave behind emotional scars that never heal.

Most couples think their clashes are unique, but conflict has been around since Adam and Eve. Instead of learning from our ancestors' mistakes though, we tend to copy them. If Mom screamed and threw CorningWare at Dad when she was angry, daughter will tend to do the same in her own marriage. If Dad withdrew by watching TV every time conflict arose, son will be inclined to follow his example.

No matter what was modeled by your parents, however, you can reframe your thinking. You can realign the way you handle disagreements to better reflect the pattern God wants to see.

Can you imagine Jesus dealing with disagreements as we often do with our spouses? How would He feel about the way you treat your mate during a heated argument?

"But that's just the way I am," you might say. "Besides, my spouse keeps provoking me!" Instead of justifying our behavior, we need to discover how to

properly react to disagreements no matter how intense they may be or who's at fault.

Each time you work out a disagreement in a healthy way, you're better equipped to deal with the next one. Conflict handled properly can fine-tune a relationship: "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).

Resolving disagreements can also "unstick" a couple, moving the two of you to new levels of intimacy and growth. Some of the closest moments a couple can experience often arrive after resolving conflicts. It's like a lightning storm on a warm summer night; though the lightning itself may be scary, it helps to clean the air. Negatively charged ions produced by the storm attach themselves to pollutants, which fall to the ground. That's why the air smells so clean at those times.

The same is true when you deal with disagreements in an appropriate way. Even if the discussion is loud and animated, it can help to rid relationships of contaminants and move you in a positive direction.

To understand how to handle disagreements effectively, let's first look at some techniques that *don't* work.

1. *Denial.* Why are so many married women in our society depressed? Quite a few psychologists believe it's because they don't feel free to discuss frustrations and disagreements with their husbands. That's because husbands tend to deny such problems and refuse to confront them.

Some men simply don't know how to deal with disagreements properly, but many have discovered a payoff in not resolving conflict. They can maintain control by refusing to discuss problems, keeping their wives guessing about the state of their relationship. Wives then hold back because they've discovered that keeping peace with their husbands keeps the men in a good mood and increases the chances of intimacy.

This is not a healthy approach. Failing to resolve disagreements affects our relationships as arthritis does our bodies; it impairs

movement, slows us down and causes a lot of pain. The only way to deal with "relational arthritis" is to develop healthy responses to conflict.

2. *Downplaying.* This is the "Oh, it's nothing" response. This often happens when you feel that dealing with the issue is an exercise in futility. You tell yourself that things will only turn out like before—with your spouse not listening and with both of you upset.

But downplaying the significance of a problem doesn't make it go away. It only sets a negative precedent for dealing with future disagreements.

3. *Exaggeration.* Don't make a disagreement bigger than it is. Not every minor irritation and difference in perspective has to be dissected and "put to rest." Does it really matter if your spouse doesn't share your enthusiasm for

sweet pickles and The Three Stooges? Does either of you have to win a debate over which brand of paper towel or route to your church is best?

4. *Nagging.* Don't fall prey to the idea that picking a fight is the best way to get your spouse's attention and deal with a disagreement. Constant nagging is a common example of such erroneous thinking.

A dad was watching the Atlanta Braves on TV one day when his four-year-old came up and wanted to wrestle. Just to see how the boy would respond, the father ignored him and stared at the game. The child made faces, waved and jumped up and down, but Dad gave no response. Finally the boy knocked on his father's forehead and asked, "Hey, Dad, are you in there?"

Lesson: It's better to do a little gentle "knock-

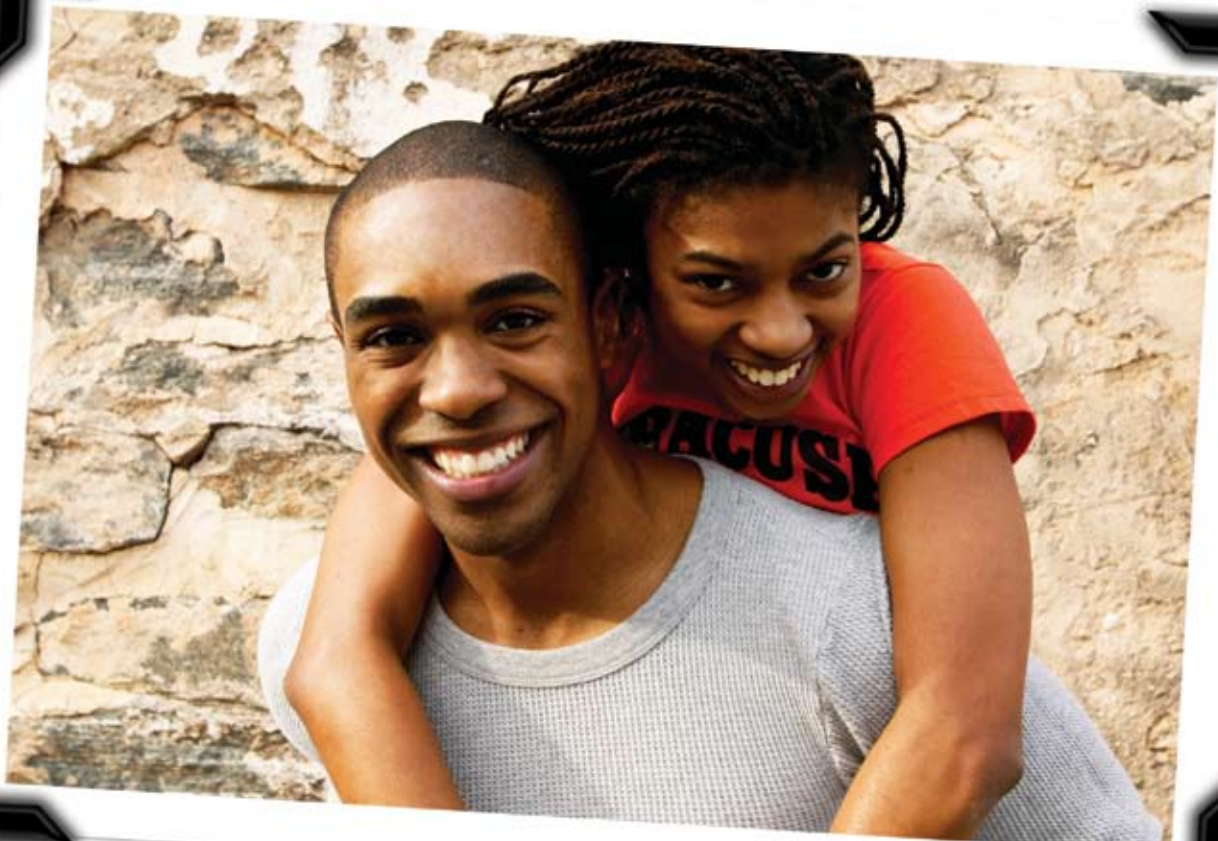
ing" than to incite a riot to get your mate's attention. "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

5. *Resurrecting the dead.* Bringing up lifeless issues from previous disagreements only "stirs the stink." Perhaps that's why the apostle Paul wrote that love "keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5).

When a disagreement is over, it's over! Don't rehash old arguments. Some counselors suggest that couples shouldn't bring up an issue that's more than a month or two old. In other words, don't get *historical* in your marriage by continually bringing up the past!

So much for the don'ts. Here are some positive ways to deal with disagreements in your marriage.

1. *Pick the right time and place.* Get away from the telephone, TV, pager, e-mail, and other distractions. Pick a soothing, peaceful envi-



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ronment; a Saturday shopping trip at Sam's Club isn't a good time or place to resolve conflict! Neither are moments when you're going out the door, sitting down to dinner or lying down for a good night's rest.

Be willing to say, "I agree that this is important, but we need to wait until later to talk about it. Let's go out tomorrow night." Allowing 24 hours to cool down and think is often a wise alternative anyway.

2. *Be prepared.* Understand that emotional events like birthdays, weddings, holidays, anniversaries and graduations are a natural breeding ground for disagreements. People tend to be "wired and tired"; little sparks can ignite big fires. Try to get plenty of rest before these events, and give your spouse extra grace and forgiveness.
3. *Talk about yourself.* When discussing

disagreements, learn to use "I" statements such as "I think" or "I feel"—rather than "you say" or "you always." "You" accusations are usually meant to hurt, not to bring peace and understanding.

4. *Listen more than you talk.* Seek to understand where your partner is coming from, even when you may not agree with his or her viewpoint. Learn to listen instead of just trying to figure out what you're going to say next.

Temper and control what you think you have a right to say, too. As Ogden Nash put it, "To keep your marriage brimming with love in the loving cup, whenever you're wrong, admit it; whenever you're right, shut up."

5. *Keep your fingers to yourself.* Pointing fingers may be acceptable when correcting toddlers or pets, but it's not healthy between spouses. Pointing is a form of attacking, indicating that



the recipient has done something terribly wrong—which often isn't the case. And no one, including your spouse, likes to have a finger wagged in his or her face.

6. *Keep your arguments out of the bedroom.* That's a place for unity and intimacy, not hashing out differences. Don't use sex (or lack thereof) to manipulate your partner. Sex was never designed to be used as a weapon, withheld without mutual consent (1 Corinthians 7:3-5).
7. *Remember that it's your problem, too.* It's tempting to say, "I don't have the problem, you have the problem!" But if there's trouble in your relationship, it belongs to both of you!

You're a vital part of a *marriage system*. When one part of the system is out of kilter, it throws the entire system off balance. It's like touching a mobile hanging over a baby crib;


disturb part of it, and you affect the whole thing.

When you view your spouse's problem as your own, you're much more likely to get serious about helping to work it out. This makes a "win-win"—rather than an "I win, you lose" scenario—more likely.

8. *Learn to see through conflict.* Search for the real issues that often lie beneath the surface. Say, "Wait a minute. We keep arguing about all kinds of irrelevant stuff. What's the real problem here?"
9. *Bring God into the conversation.* Ask Him for wisdom when you can't seem to find the answers (James 1:5-6). And if the two of you are Christians, nothing will put a heated argument on "pause" more quickly than two small words: "Let's pray!"







10. *Remember your vows.* Don't threaten divorce during conflict. Threats will only intensify the pain—and leave scars. “For better or worse” will not be stricken from your vows simply because you're in the middle of a major disagreement.

Are you and your spouse disagreeing? Look for mutually beneficial solutions that resolve the tension. If the conflict is too intense to handle, or if one spouse gets extremely emotional, call a time-out until you've both calmed down. If that doesn't help, involve a counselor to assist you in getting perspective.

You can't eliminate disagreements in your relationship. But by taking a proactive approach early in your marriage, you can learn to address conflict in a way that makes everyone—including the Lord—smile.

—Mitch Temple

When Should We Agree to Disagree?


Some couples think every difference of opinion in a marriage has to be settled. They fear disaster lurks when spouses doesn't agree on every issue.

Frank and Lois know better.

It's bedtime, and the two of them are once again apologizing to each other for an argument they had earlier today. They almost get the giggles when they realize how stupid it was. They can hardly remember the subject—something about their upcoming vacation. Both were very upset and hurt by what was said, whatever it was.

A long time ago Frank and Lois made a pact to never go to bed mad, which is good. But they've wasted the better part of the day being upset over something they can barely recall—a conflict about which they could have agreed to disagree.

It's hard to guess how many arguments could be averted if couples would pray about their differences and let them go. This is hard to do, since most of us want to be “right” and justify our behavior.



Many couples, especially Christians, assume that if they're truly compatible and in love they'll agree on practically everything. They may even think that disagreement is a sign of drifting apart—or that agreeing to disagree means settling for second best.

That's a faulty judgment based on an unrealistic expectation.

Differences are usually what attract partners to one another. If you doubt that, take a personality test from a counselor—which can be fun—and highlight the differences that enrich your relationship. Sharing all opinions and preferences isn't going to happen, and you wouldn't want it to. Agreeing to disagree, when it's appropriate, is realistic—and can help each of you appreciate the other's uniqueness.

If you have children, agreeing to disagree also can set a good example for them. Watching you gives them a broader perspective. Children aren't usually confused or upset by parents disagreeing, but may feel threatened by the behavior they observe when there's no resolution of a conflict.

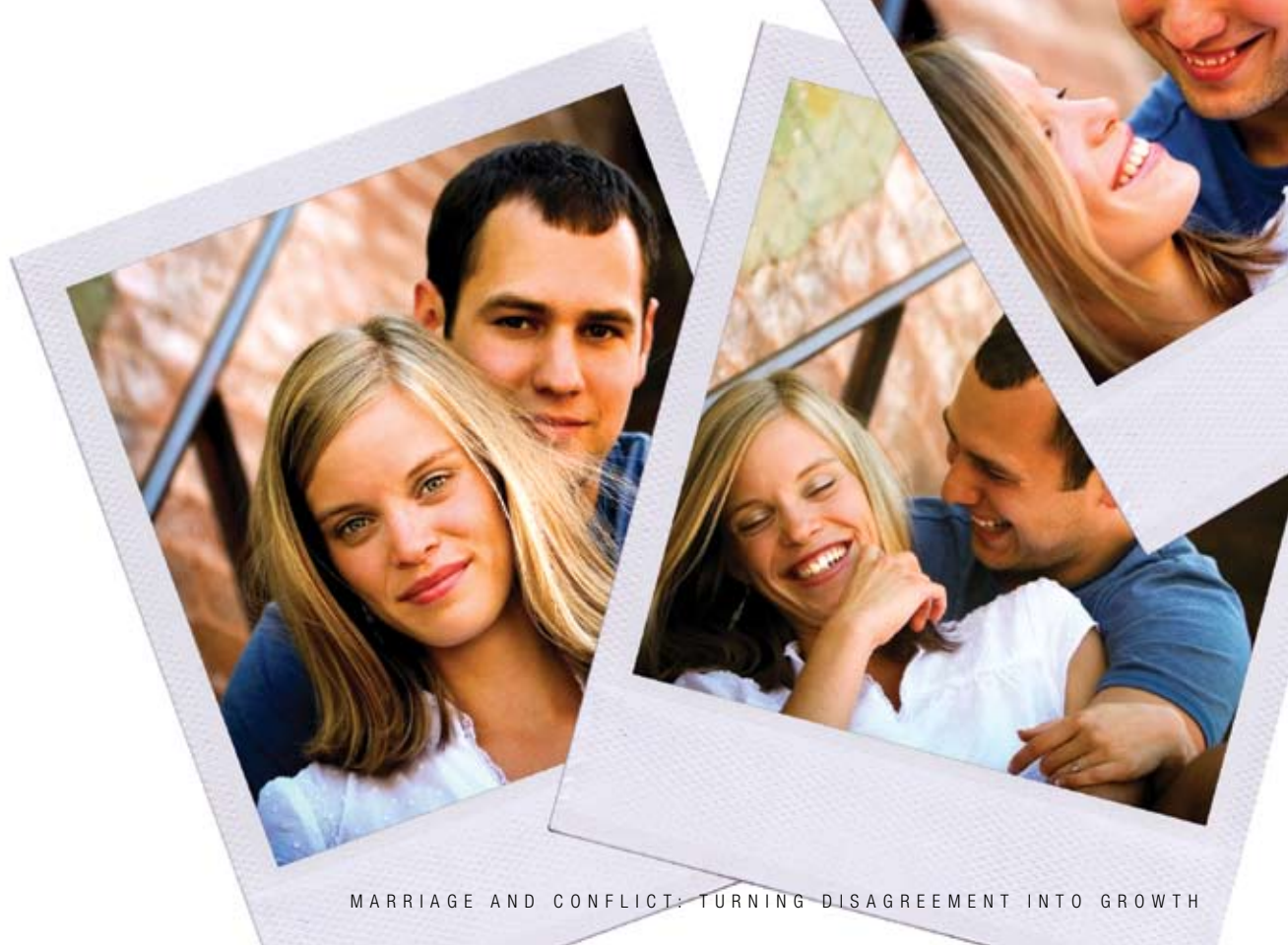
So when should you agree to disagree? And when

should you “stick to your guns”?

The answers to those questions will depend on the importance you attach to each issue. There are certain decisions such as having children, setting life goals and choosing where to live that may require outside help to negotiate if you can't agree. Other cases—whether to have pets, where to go on vacation, how much to spend on dining out, who cleans the bathrooms—may be easier to work out on your own. The key seems to be your willingness to not get defensive nor to insist on “winning.”

Sometimes agreeing to disagree is a choice to accept your spouse's preference out of respect or love. For example, Dan doesn't really want to have a second child at this time. But his wife Bonnie does. After discussing it, Dan tells her that he won't stand in the way of her enthusiasm; he'll support and love her without resentment.

But when a disagreement can't be resolved and either of you harbors resentment that interferes with your relationship, agreeing to disagree may only be “stuffing” feelings. If that happens, get help so that the resentment can be released.



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Very few disagreements are worth fighting for. But there are healthy ways to express your desires and negotiate resolution. When you make a request with respect and an open mind, your chances of being heard are that much greater.

Here are some principles to keep in mind when it comes to dealing with disagreements.

1. Don't expect to agree on everything.
2. Convey your desire without anger and without having to be "right."
3. Ask yourself if you're being selfish.
4. Remember that your relationship, not the issue, is most important.
5. Try not to take things too personally.
6. Remember that building a relationship takes time.
7. Forgive, forgive, forgive.
8. Keep a sense of humor.

When disagreements arise, try using that as a checklist. Often if these principles reflect your attitude, you'll find it easier to let go of the issue you've been struggling with.

Let's say that Frank and Lois love to go out to dinner and a movie. But Frank likes action movies and Lois likes romantic comedies. Frank would rather take poison than watch a romantic comedy; Lois would rather be skinned alive than see an action film. If they compromise by taking turns, one person always loses. How can they agree to disagree?

First, they give each other permission not to agree on everything. Then they listen to each other without judging. They feel secure in the knowledge that they're not trying to change each other, and that each has a choice to act in a loving way even when the two of them have different perspectives.

They brainstorm some creative options. Finally they decide that they'll go out to dinner, then pick a cineplex where each can see the movie of his or her choice.

It may not be the perfect solution, and they may change their minds after trying this approach. But it beats arguing over issues they can't even remember at the end of the day.

—Romie Hurley

What If We Have a Lot of Unresolved Conflicts?

After only two years of marriage, Nancy and John are living very separate lives.

The problem? Neither of them likes conflict, so they avoid each other.

Nancy pours herself into hobbies and caring for their nine-month-old son. John is staying later at work, and often goes straight from there to the health club. On those nights, he doesn't even see Nancy or his son before they go to bed. Using the excuse that he doesn't want to disturb his wife, he sleeps on the couch.

John and Nancy can't remember when they last had a night out together. Their sexual intimacy has dwindled to less than twice a month, with little tenderness or joy. Both are concerned about their marriage, but feel immobilized by the fear of getting angry, getting hurt or hurting each other.

Maybe you can identify with Nancy and John. Unresolved conflict is hanging over your marriage like a thundercloud, threatening a storm you don't want

to brave. Perhaps you've always resisted discussing problems. Or your efforts to resolve differences have ended in icy silence or shouting matches, experiences you don't care to repeat.

Not resolving conflict may give an initial feeling of peace or harmony, but it's like a wound that heals on the surface when underneath there's an infection that needs to be released. No one enjoys lancing the wound, but real recovery can't take place otherwise.

Fear of conflict can stem from having experienced too much of it as a child—or from never having seen any. Some parents shelter their children too much by not revealing disagreements nor demonstrating how they can be resolved. Others display only the arguments, not showing the process whereby disagreements are worked out, leading to a fear of the unknown.

In the case of John and Nancy, it would be good to share their childhood experiences with conflict and what their expectations were for marriage. They may discover that their expectations were unrealistic or mistaken—for example, thinking that Christians must never argue or disagree.

How couples deal with conflict is one of the greatest predictors of whether or not a marriage will end in divorce. In most marriages, conflict resolution is initiated by the partner who's more assertive or more of a pursuer physically and verbally. That can at least bring situations to the table, but the healthiest scenario requires freedom for both spouses to start conversations on areas of concern.

When both partners aren't assertive or fear conflict or lack the skills to deal with it, resentment can build quickly from the proverbial molehill into a mountain. It's crucial to get outside help in that case; you're dealing not only with personality issues, but most likely a lifelong pattern of avoidance. A good family therapist, or a pastor who has time and expertise to work with you on an ongoing basis, could coach you.

When unresolved conflicts are immobilizing your marriage, your goal should be to "get unstuck." Here are five steps in that direction.

1. Forgive your spouse.
2. Pray together.
3. Appreciate each other in a tangible way

(cards, gifts, special meals, etc.).

4. Discover and confess stubbornness and the desire to be "right."
5. Get help from a wise mentor or counselor.

In the case of Nancy and John, it took a crisis to get them to a therapist. Nancy grew severely depressed and ended up in the hospital. John's concern for her, along with her doctor's prescription, drove them to see a Christian counselor.

After working with the therapist for several months, Nancy and John are less afraid of conflict. They know there's still a long road ahead, but are encouraged by how honestly they're expressing their feelings—especially when they remember how carefully they used to avoid that.

In addition, Nancy has been working out at the health club with John twice a week—while their son stays with John's parents. They go out to eat on those nights, and find they have energy and excitement for intimacy—and staying up later than usual.

—Romie Hurley

What If an Argument Gets Out of Control?

Once again, Sue and Ken have gone to bed angry. Each lies as far over on his or her side of the bed as is humanly possible.

Sue is thinking about the terrible things Ken said to her, and how afraid she was. She'll spend most of the night unable to sleep, remembering all their fights in almost three years of marriage.

Ken, meanwhile, is exhausted. He thinks about how unreasonable Sue is. Then, suddenly, he falls asleep.


Some couples, like Ken and Sue, have a habit of letting arguments get out of control. Others find it happening only once in a while. Still others try never to raise any sensitive subjects, fearing the resulting argument will degenerate into a verbal battle that leads inevitably to divorce.

Why do arguments spin out of control? Here are seven things couples need to understand about disagreements that go off the deep end.

1. Spouses become irrational for many reasons. It can stem from feeling overwhelmed, threatened, provoked, criticized or just misunderstood. The emotions may not be wrong, but their out-of-control expression can be. As the Bible says, "A fool gives full vent to his anger, but a wise man keeps himself under control" (Proverbs 29:11).
2. Some people seem only too glad to lose control during an argument. There's a kind of adrenaline rush that comes with expressing anger, and it can be addictive. That's one reason Ken could fall asleep easily once he came off the "high" of the argument; the adrenaline depletion had worn him out.
3. Fearing out-of-control arguments can cause a spouse to bury his or her feelings, so as not to provoke the other person. That may work in the short run, but ignoring explosive issues won't work long-term. They'll eventually come to a head.




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4. A wife tends to remember situations much longer than a husband does, and the danger of her dredging up the past is not only real but common. This is overwhelming to the spouse who tends to forget, or wants to forget, things said and done in anger.
 5. Both aggressive and passive/aggressive behavior can be dangerous. In most couples, one spouse tends to be more of an aggressive pursuer in arguments. This person usually gets more of the blame because he or she is easy to identify. But the passive, quieter mate who nags or blames is often just as destructive.

Here's an example of a passive/aggressive statement: "I know how smart you are, but you'll never really be able to get a good job since you didn't finish your degree." This behavior is harder to identify than outright aggression; even the person who uses it may not see the need to repent and change.

6. Bullying in a relationship can be intimidating, but it's important not to run from threats. It's better to find a constructive way to deal with the bullying and avoid living in fear. There are times when a gentle spirit can turn away wrath (Proverbs 15:1), but this is presented in the Bible as an intentional, positive act—not one motivated by fear of provoking someone to anger.
7. Physical violence is never OK. Threats of physical violence must be handled immediately. If you feel threatened, get to a safe place. Put distance between you and the person endangering you; call the police if necessary.

Physical violence doesn't stop without intervention. Abusers must learn to manage anger. Once the danger is past, insist on counseling. Also, educate yourself about abuse cycles and how to protect yourself in the future.





Out-of-control arguments don't always involve violence, of course. No matter how much you and your spouse love each other, no matter how understanding you try to be and no matter how strongly you want to avoid hurting each other, there will be times when arguments get out of control.

Here are some ways to prepare for those times and to minimize their negative effects.

1. Be aware of your physical reactions and triggers, to let you know when it's time to back off. Most people tense up when uncomfortable or threatened.
 2. Take responsibility to communicate how you're feeling and what you're thinking.
 3. Never, ever bully, threaten or intimidate your spouse.
 4. Ask for a time-out when you need it; set another time to talk.
 5. If you know a subject is too volatile to handle alone, discuss it in the presence of a neutral party such as a pastor or counselor.
6. If you're "walking on eggshells" or hiding in fear in order to avoid angering your spouse, get outside help.
 7. Pray with your spouse when things get too intense, even if you avoid the immediate topic for the moment. The act of submitting to God's authority may bring some relief.
 8. Pray individually—a prayer of repentance for your own attitude and actions.
 9. Forgive your spouse. This doesn't mean agreeing with his or her position or excusing abuse; it means giving up your determination to get revenge.

Remember Ken and Sue? When they get up the next day, Ken apologizes for the mean things he said—as he's done many times before. This time, though, he admits that he's afraid of hurting Sue during one of these fights. He says he knows he has a problem and wants help in getting to the bottom of the rage he often feels. Since he and Sue have been talking about having

children, the thought of hurting them scares him, too.

Until now, Sue has always retreated in fear. Now, because of Ken's admission, she feels safe enough to express some of her feelings. She acknowledges that she has a problem with fear and would be willing to see a counselor with her husband.

Don't let your anger, or your spouse's, dominate your relationship. And don't let fear of an out-of-control argument keep you and your mate from communicating honestly.

—Romie Hurley

What If the Same Conflicts Keep Coming Up?

"I cannot believe I married this man!" Cindy told the counselor. "I know that I love him, but right now I am so angry with him.

"Kent never follows through with anything he says he is going to do. Sometimes I wonder if I married the wrong person. We continue to have the same fights

over and over again; nothing ever gets resolved.

"For example, last night I asked him to take out the trash. He told me he would do it when the basketball game was over. This morning the trash was still here, and so I took it out. Tonight we'll talk about it and he'll apologize and expect me to forgive him. But then the same situation will happen again.

"I am tired of his empty apologies when there is no change. I'm beginning to feel a lot of resentment, and we've only been married three years. I'm afraid that our marriage is going to be in trouble if we can't get a handle on this."

Cindy believes that when Kent agrees to take the trash out for her after the game, he'll do it that night. Kent believes that as long as the trash gets taken out in the next few days, he's lived up to his responsibility. Or he thinks that because he intended to follow through and just forgot, Cindy should remind him again. He can't understand why she took it out and then got mad at him; after all, it wasn't that full in the first place!

Cindy's frustration is a common one for recently married couples: the conflict that arises is temporarily

resolved, but continues to creep up because no lasting remedy has been found. These unresolved conflicts leave spouses feeling as if they married the wrong person, or that their marriage is doomed.

Conflict in any relationship is normal. The problem occurs when you don't work through it.

What should you do if the same issues keep popping up, unresolved? Here are some steps to take.

1. Realize that you learn to work through conflict by confronting the issue—not by avoiding it.

2. Remember the purpose of confronting the conflict: resolution. Your ultimate goal is to reconcile and make your relationship even stronger. If you're aiming just to spout hurt and anger, you'll damage the relationship. Winning the battle isn't important, either. What matters is continuing to strengthen your bond.

3. Don't procrastinate. Conflict resolution should be done as soon as either party recognizes that he or she is feeling upset.

4. Set aside a time for discussion when each spouse can be at his or her best—not when one party is extremely tired or abnormally stressed. You want both

partners to be willing and ready to seek reconciliation.

5. Take turns expressing your feelings about the conflict at hand. Listen carefully.

6. Use "I" statements instead of attacking the other person. Examples: "I feel hurt when you don't follow through," rather than, "You're so irresponsible. You never keep your promises."

7. Specifically express your need to your spouse. For instance, "It would help me if you'd take the trash out as soon as you agree to do it."

8. Come up with a plan of action. For example, write down chores that each person is responsible for and when each chore is to be accomplished. In the case of Cindy and Kent, they wrote that Kent is to take out the trash every Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. Now both have the same expectation; Kent knows Cindy can't nag him, but she has the freedom to confront him if he doesn't follow through on his agreement.

9. Find another couple, a pastor or a counselor to whom both of you will be accountable. Share the plan of action you've agreed upon. Knowing that someone is holding you accountable can help you follow through.

If your chronic conflicts have dragged on and on, never reaching resolution, you may be skeptical about whether these methods really work. Consider the cases of these two couples.

“Samantha and I always fought over money,” Joe said. “She would spend without talking to me and write checks without logging them in the register. Every month when I sat down to do the finances, we would fight. We both hated the beginning of the month.

“We finally solved this conflict by setting up a budget. Sam knows how much we have to spend in each budgeted area. I got duplicate checks so if she forgets to write down the amounts, I still have a record. This has saved us numerous fights. Now neither of us dreads the beginning of the month.”

Gail and Tom also discovered the value of coming up with a plan. Gail felt Tom never listened to her when she came home from work, wanting to talk about her day. They discussed the problem many times, with Gail in tears and Tom feeling nagged and then apologizing for his insensitivity. The conflict would die for a few days; then they’d be right back where they started.

Gail knew the repeated battles were harming their marriage. So she came home early from work one day, made Tom a great dinner, and shared her hurts with him. “I love you so much and I hate it when we fight,” she said. “You are my best friend and I want to share my day with you. Would you be willing to give me ten minutes of your night without the TV on, just to let me share?”

They agreed to talk after dinner every night. Now Tom turns the TV off and sits down with Gail for 10 to 15 minutes while she tells him about her day. Instead of arguing, they’re closer. Gail, feeling cared for, has stopped nagging Tom—who’s pleased that he can show love to his wife this way.

If you’re driving to work and hit huge potholes that damage your tires and make you late, what do you do? You take a different route the next day.

The same should be true in your marriage. If a conflict keeps coming up, it’s silly to keep going down that road. Take another path that will benefit your relationship. Instead of submerging the conflict, develop a plan that helps you resolve it once and for all.

—Sheryl DeWitt







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