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Strengthening the Family
BUTTING HEADS BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE
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With high rates of divorce among first time marriages, and even higher rates of divorce among second marriages, you may wonder what makes marriages succeed or fail especially as you witness divorce occurring within the church family. More importantly, you may wonder what will make *your* marriage endure and thrive? One of the common misconceptions is that couples who are successfully married “never” fight. Dr. John Gottman, Professor of Psychology at the University of Washington writes in his book *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail** that “a lasting marriage results from a couple’s ability to resolve the conflicts that are *inevitable* [emphasis added] in any relationship.”

It is difficult to offer a universal prescription for how to resolve conflict because different couples fight differently and “resolve” conflict differently. Gottman identifies three styles of problem solving that healthy marriages tend to fall within. These are:

- ❖ the *validating marriage* where compromise is often and calmly worked out and mutual satisfaction is achieved as problems arise;
- ❖ the *conflict-avoiding marriage*, where differences are rarely discussed openly or directly and couples agree to disagree; and
- ❖ the *volatile marriage* where conflict is frequent and may result in heated disputes.

All three of these styles can be stable as long as you and your spouse are able to achieve the right balance of positive and negative interactions. Gottman writes that his research has found “you must have at least five times as many positive as negative moments together if your marriage is to be stable.”

Four important strategies for building a healthy and stable marriage that are critical to effective conflict resolution are to:

- ❖ *calm yourself*
- ❖ *speak and listen nondefensively*
- ❖ *validate each other and your relationship*
- ❖ *practice, practice, and practice the above three strategies*

Calm Yourself. When you’re angry and your heart is racing, it’s difficult to think clearly. This is when you are most likely to say or do something that you will regret later. If your pulse starts to go up, or you can feel yourself getting worked up, call a time out. Leave the room, take a bath, go for a drive, soak your head, listen to music, whatever it takes to help you to calm down. Be careful to avoid rehearsing what you will say when you resume your discussion – focus on thinking about things that help you to relax and be calm.

Speak and Listen Nondefensively. Building a nondefensive marriage begins with having a positive approach to your spouse and your relationship. Once you become aware of the negatives in your spouse, it is easy to overlook the positive. Make a point of finding things to praise and admire in your partner. Remind yourself of what is going right in the marriage rather than focusing only on what is wrong. When you are listening, make an effort to understand your partner's emotions and opinions from his or her perspective, *even if you don't agree*. When you are speaking, focus on expressing a specific complaint to your partner, rather than engaging in personal criticism or insulting him or her. Avoid using the words "always" and "never" when expressing your complaint.

Validate Each Other. The goal of validating your partner is to let him or her know that you understand their feelings and consider them valid, even if you don't share them. Instead of jumping to a practical solution to a problem, try to understand and respond to the emotional state of your partner. Some things you can do that help are *take responsibility* for your actions and their consequences, *apologize* when you are wrong or have hurt your partner, and honestly *compliment* your spouse for what you admire in him or her.

Practice, Practice, Practice. Just like any new skill, these techniques need to be practiced frequently to be effective. Start small, focusing on these strategies when you're talking about something neutral. With practice, they will eventually become more automatic. If you can learn these skills well enough for them to become automatic, then they will be most accessible in the middle of a fight when you are anything but calm.

The task of resolving conflict in marriage can be difficult. One or both partners in a marriage may not even realize that disagreement exists between them. Even when a husband and wife realize that they are in conflict, the true source of the conflict may not be obvious. Or it may be difficult to accept the problems and disagreements that exist because you think "loving, Christian couples never fight." In a lasting marriage, conflict is *inevitable* – even in the most loving, stable, Christian marriages. While a life of faith does not guarantee a life without conflict, a life of faith is a good foundation for resolving the conflict that does occur.

Problems in a marriage are never created overnight, and the solutions are never overnight either, especially if you have a long history together. Small problems and insignificant differences can add up to a big problem and a significant difference. Whether you are a newlywed or have been married for many years, you may find it valuable to consult a professional for guidance as you fine tune your marriage. Addressing little things now can make all the difference in ensuring that your marriage is lasting.

* This article is based on the book by John Gottman, Ph.D. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail . . . and How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

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