

Helping Couples Grow Through Conflict

Conflict need not be feared but can be seen as an opportunity for refining the marriage relationship. Many couples view conflict as an enemy because they mistake the disconnection they feel in difficult moments as the only product of the conflict. Avoiding disconnection is not the priority; repairing the inevitable breaks in any relationship is the most important goal. Growth in connection can be the ultimate product of conflict when it is used well in service of the marriage relationship. In this seminar, we will explore proven ways to help couples transform conflict into a process that nurtures the relationship.

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I. Relationships, Breakdown, and Repair

- A. What does Genesis 2:18 mean?
- B. What did "Don't eat the fruit of the tree" require?
- C. What does God's response to Adam and Eve's rebellion in relationship to Him show us?
 1. God asks questions
 2. God names consequences
 3. God intervenes to correct damage done, Genesis 3:15, 3:21, and 3:22-24

II. Persons Grow In and Through Relationships

- A. The Operative Principle of the Universe
- B. Relationships Require Conflict
 1. Conflict can be destructive
 2. Conflict can be productive

III. Conflict is an Opportunity For, Not an (Automatic) Enemy to, Productive Relationships

- A. Marks of Productive Relationships
 1. Faithfulness

2. Grace

3. Forgiveness

IV. Nurture Good Connection to Encourage Productive Conflict

A. Conversation Four: Hold Me Tight: Engaging and Connecting

1. A.R.E.

a. Accessibility: Can I reach you?

b. Responsiveness: Can I rely on you to respond to me emotionally?

c. Engagement: Do I know you will value me and stay close?

B. A deep level of emotional engagement (“Naked without shame.”)

C. Part One - What am I most afraid of? - requires exploring below the surface emotions. Three levels of emotions: surface and obvious, below the surface, and the deepest, which may not be accessed.

D. Part Two - What do I need most from you? Important to be able to openly and coherently speak your needs, inviting your spouse into a new dialogue marked by A.R.E.—accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement.

E. “Love is improvisation.” The best guide is each other’s emotions. Just like the best guide for the improvising jazz musician is to be attuned to the other members of the group, the best guide for spouses is to be attuned to the emotions of the other spouse.

V. Nurture Good Conversation to Encourage Productive Conflict

A. Turning spouses into allies

B. Being intimate is bringing your spouse in on what you are feeling and struggling with in the moment. It does not require a certain feeling.

C. Intimacy is just a sentence away—but it is hard to come up with that sentence. It is hard because I am not very aware of my own internal states—and mostly I am fighting off my shame.

D. Repairing the inevitable breaks in any relationship is the most important goal.

E. The Relationship Process

At any moment in your relationship with your spouse, you can take one of three paths:

Path 1. ATTACK or defend: You express some element of what you are experiencing, but in the form of a complaint that has the effect of coercing, criticizing, or retaliating rather than of illuminating.

“How come you always have so much to say to your friends and so little to say to me?”

Turns your partner into an enemy.

Triggers an adversarial cycle.

Which is self-reinforcing. Each partner stings in response to feeling stung. Each feels too unheard to listen, too misunderstood to be understanding.

You can always come up with a rebuttal.

Path 2. AVOID, ignore, or downplay: You keep what you are experiencing to yourself and talk about something else.

“Anything good on TV tonight?”

Turns your partner into a bit of stranger.

Triggers a withdrawn cycle.

Which is self-reinforcing: Each partner’s carefulness, politeness, or walking on eggshells stimulates the same in the other much as whispering stimulates whispering.

Path 3. CONFIDE or listen: You bring your partner in on what you are experiencing; you take in what your partner is trying to tell you.

“I’m jealous of how much fun you were having talking to Gail over the phone just now.”

Turns your partner into an ally.

Triggers an empathic (collaborative) cycle.

Which is self-reinforcing: Each partner’s confiding, admitting, reaching out, and considering the other’s viewpoint makes the other automatically do the same.

VI. Discussion: Putting It All Together.

Suggested Readings:

William Doherty. *Take Back Your Marriage: Sticking Together in a World That Pulls Us Apart.*

2nd Edition. Guilford. 2013

Daniel Hughes. *8 Keys to Building Your Best Relationships.* Norton. 2013.

Sue Johnson and Kenneth Sanderfer. *Created for Connection: The “Hold Me Tight” Guide for*

Christian Couples—Seven Conversations for a Lifetime of Love. Little, Brown. 2016

James Sells and Mark Yarhouse. *Counseling Couples in Conflict: A Relational Restoration Model.* IVP. 2011

C. Christopher Smith. *How the Body of Christ Talks.* Brazos Press. 2019

Daniel Wile. *Couples Therapy: A Nontraditional Approach.* John Wiley and Sons. 1993.