

How to Handle Conflict

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

produced by Masterpiece
Theater.

This is a scene from a recent TV series:

Two well-educated people marry and take up life together in the country where the husband's career is established.

The wife, content at first with being a homemaker, soon finds herself at loose ends. As time passes, this feeling increases, in spite of her joy in becoming pregnant.

But, as often happens, she doesn't tell her husband how she feels, because he is so obviously content with his duties as a schoolmaster and with her. He, in turn, works hard at avoiding the obvious signs of his wife's unhappiness. He even denies there is any problem when his colleagues make an effort to tell him.

The simmering conflict comes to a head when the wife has a miscarriage and plunges into a lingering depression. Finally, in desperation, she runs away.

The husband follows and, in a dramatic meeting, the wife confesses how useless she feels and how meaningless her life has become. The husband, agitated and upset but very much in love with her, says he doesn't see how he can live without his wife.

That situation of conflict, portraying a marriage in the late 1930s, is from "To Serve Them All My Days."

In the series, though the conflict has all the potential for disaster, David and Christine Powlett-Jones are able to talk through their difficulties and find a solution. Thanks to the helpful suggestion of a third person, Mrs. Powlett-Jones finds an outlet for her abundant energies and talents by joining in her husband's work as an educator.

Conflict, as marriage counselors are quick to note, is a fact of life for most married couples. Drs. Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James Whitehead refer to conflict as "one of the many embraces of marriage" in their new book, "Marrying Well: Possibilities in Christian Marriage Today."

For the Whiteheads, the presence of conflict doesn't necessarily mean the marriage is on the rocks. On the contrary — they think conflict can be a sign of health, since it provides couples an opportunity to learn how to communicate better with each other.

The Whiteheads say married couples tend to display two common patterns for handling conflict: avoidance or engagement.

Avoidance: refusing to admit any conflict exists and even going to some lengths to get out of facing conflict. Some people, according to the Whiteheads, make it a practice to deny they have any conflicts. Sometimes they do so out of a fear of strong

emotions, in themselves or in their partner. Other times it comes from a sense that a particular relationship is fragile.

Engagement: admitting that conflict exists and being willing to take a look at troubling situations, even when this involves taking a risk.

One key to effective communication in the midst of conflict is to be "direct and specific," the Whiteheads say.

Other keys to successful handling of day-to-day kinds of conflict include sharing information honestly and openly, exploring alternative solutions to specific problems or seeking outside help and support. The Whiteheads observe that couples often find there is more than one solution to a particular problem when they are willing to look for it together.

Finally, the Whiteheads are convinced the most important benefit of learning to handle conflict is the quality of communication which can result.

... THE TOAST ...

Advice, stories, analogies, etc., lead to one thing — a toast for happiness by everyone like, "Let your love be kind, good humored, and tolerant. If it is, you can't help but be happy."

Ladies and gentlemen, raise your glasses and drink a toast to the continued happiness of a wonderful couple."

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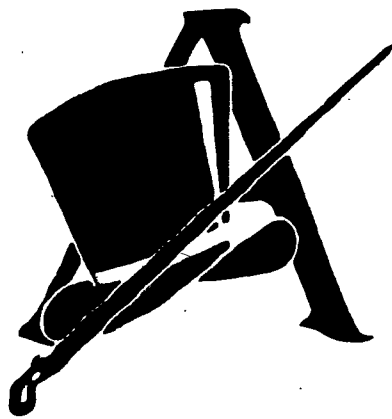
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