

Couples need to learn ways of resolving normal conflicts

By Katharine Bird
By NC News Service)

Mary Roemer has counseled clients at the Family and Children Center in Mishawaka, Ind., for 10 years. In a recent interview she talked about the role of conflict in marriage.

Q. Is conflict in marriage bad?

A. No, it is essential to a healthy, intimate relationship. Conflict is a sign that a marriage is alive. Conflict is the arena where growth in a relationship takes place.

Growth and change are something we are always struggling with. New life comes through change. How a person handles conflicts tells what a relationship will be.

Q. What areas do couples come into conflict over?

A. The No. 1 reason people come to me is the lack of intimacy in their marriage. They complain they have no feeling of being close to a partner.

Conflict arises in the arenas where intimacy is played out: in accepting differences; in expectations; in demands for personal power; in getting needs met; in sexual expectations.

But conflicts also need to be worked out in numerous day-to-day matters: Where are we going to spend our summer vacation? How shall we use the spare room — as a sewing room for you or a study for me?

Q. How well do couples handle conflict in your experience?

A. It's a terrible problem for most couples. Many haven't developed ways of working through conflict effectively.

Q. Why is conflict such a problem?

A. Many people don't understand that conflict is a healthy thing in a relationship. Too many choose fight, flight or accommodation rather than deal with conflict head on.

But it is balderdash to think that those techniques are effective ways of dealing with conflict. They do nothing to resolve the underlying problem which, if allowed to fester, can destroy a relationship. Some individuals end up in the divorce court; others have chronic rashes or migraine headaches.

Q. Can you give an example of a client's initial consultation with you?

A. A woman will come in to my office alone and complain that her husband doesn't listen to her, that she can't communicate with him and isn't getting her needs met.



Working through — rather than fleeing from — conflicts can help couples build stronger relationships.

Q. How do you help her?

A. I encourage her to bring her husband in. Then I work on helping her to be more effective in the whole area of give-and-take with her husband.

I often start with asking what I consider a pivotal question: What do you want?

So many people don't know what they want. They get embarrassed when I ask that question because they can't answer it.

Yet what people typically want is appreciation and recognition, to be understood and to have some sense of being personally effective in a relationship.

Q. Could you explain how people use anger in handling conflict?

A. For some couples, anger is a contact sport. If you have lost other ways of being effective with a mate, shouting back and forth is a way of making contact.

Q. How do you help people who battle constantly?

A. Such couples need a new road map. They may not realize that not everybody uses anger as a way of handling conflict.

The first thing is to slow them down. People who are angry are emotional and the more emotional people are, the less able they are to solve problems.

I make it plain that in my office I make the rules. I may insist that each person speak for 10 minutes without being interrupted. It may be the first time in years that each has listened without verbally responding.

I also try to get the couple to achieve some agreement by the end of the hour in my office, maybe simply some agreement on how to parent a 5-year-old.

Q. What are some techniques for handling conflict that you find effective?

A. I like to talk in terms of broad categories: communication skills, assertiveness, conflict resolution.

1. Communication skills: Listen carefully; make sure the message being sent is the message received.

2. Assertiveness: Be persistent and clear; repeat when necessary.

3. Conflict resolution: Look for a number of solutions to a situation. Too often each person sees only one. There are usually several.

Don't personalize the problem. Leave the prepositional phrase, "to me," out of your vocabulary. Statements like, "Why are you doing this to me?" can make the other person feel threatened and defensive. It gets in the way of resolving a problem.

Don't blame and accuse the other person. That only escalates a problem.

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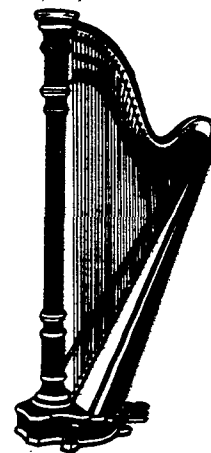
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