

Resolving Marital Conflicts

Every marriage experiences problems from time to time. Misunderstandings, mistrust, disagreements and a lack of communication and intimacy between spouses are often to blame. Making a marriage work requires a commitment to understanding each other better, trying harder and making compromises. With the right effort, attitude and techniques, you can learn to manage these problems.

Common Causes

There can be many reasons why a marriage encounters difficulties. Some of the most common include:

- Incompatible personalities (dissimilar values and interests)
- Financial difficulties
- The couple married at a very young age
- The couple married impulsively (without getting to know each other better)
- Psychological or addiction problems of one or both partners
- One or both partners had parents in an unhappy marriage
- Different levels of education by partners
- One or both partners were previously married

These factors do not always cause problems in marriages, as every marriage is unique. However, in some marriages, they can become the cause of conflict or stress.

Warning Signs

Researchers suggest that the following are among many signs that may indicate serious problems in a marriage:

- Worsening communication
- Different role expectations from each partner (e.g., the husband expects the wife to stay home with the children despite her desire to work, or vice versa)
- Unrealistic marriage expectations (e.g., the duration of the marriage will be like a constant honeymoon)
- Sexual problems
- Conflicts with relatives and in-laws
- Hiding money or denying a partner access to finances
- Jealousy (e.g., of the spouse's career success or popularity)
- Infidelity
- Physical or mental abuse

The Value of Communication

Experts agree that the most important ingredient in a successful relationship is effective communication. One research study revealed that the average married couple collectively spends only four minutes each day engaging in meaningful conversations. A healthy relationship should be founded on open communication, as well as love and trust.

Opening up the lines of healthy communication sometimes can be especially challenging for one partner. If your partner does not feel like talking, do not force the issue. A persistent monologue by one spouse will not improve matters. Pick a better time to sit down with your partner and express your concerns. Reassure your spouse that it is okay to share his or her feelings.

If you have trouble opening up, try listening to your spouse's point of view first. It is okay to have a different opinion. Try to find a productive way to communicate these differences. Instead of denying a problem, express it and vocalize your feelings. Employing the silent treatment or shutting yourself off from your partner is an immature reaction, and it will not help to solve your conflict. It is sometimes necessary to take a break from arguing to collect your thoughts. However, let your partner know this is your intention.

Conflict-resolution Techniques

- **Think before you speak:** Avoid "you" messages and exaggerative "all or none" statements such as, "You never give me any real love or affection." These types of communications are accusatory and hostile. Instead, use "I" and "we" messages that indicate your emotions, expectations and needs: "I would really appreciate it if you would let me know what you are feeling" or "We need to give each other more affection."
- **Avoid ultimatums and threats:** These widen the communication gap and demonstrate your inability to compromise fairly.
- **Negotiate:** When an argument erupts, there are essentially three choices: fight, flee or be flexible. Compromise is almost always the best approach. Take the high road and be the first to offer to compromise.
- **Put yourself in your partner's shoes:** Try to understand his or her point of view. Tell your spouse you respect his or her feelings. Critique yourself. Are you being fair and flexible enough in your position? Could you try harder? Is there a better way to say what you said to your partner? If so, work at changing your behavior.
- **Be clear and thorough:** Express your arguments and expectations tactfully. Indicate your displeasure maturely, and clarify the reason why you disagree.
- **Avoid using emotionally charged words and profanities:** Communicate maturely and tactfully, and treat your partner with respect.
- **Accentuate the positive:** While it is important to indicate your displeasure with your partner's actions or words during a disagreement, try to be fair and acknowledge their strengths. Instead of concentrating on their negative personality traits, let your spouse know which traits and actions you appreciate.

- **Stay calm:** Instead of becoming angry and losing control, remain calm and collected. Talk to your partner at a normal volume. Avoid finger-pointing or over-expressive body gestures.
- **Allow for an equal exchange:** When trying to resolve an argument, give your partner equal time to state their views, and rebut your points without interrupting them.
- **Be the first to apologize:** Often, each spouse waits for the other to give in and say, "I'm sorry," as if it were an admission of defeat. Is your ultimate goal to win the argument or to be happy? Show strength and class by apologizing for your part in the conflict.
- **Practice timeouts:** When the disagreement becomes too heated, take a breather. Do not storm out of the room without saying anything. Ask your partner if you can take a brief timeout to compose yourself and gather your thoughts.
- **Record your conversations:** Many therapists recommend making audio or videotapes of one of your arguments and then watching it together. Analyze each partner's message, and discuss ways each of you could have improved your communication.
- **Recap:** Once the argument is resolved, review your discussion. Talk about what was learned and what should be avoided the next time you disagree.
- **Do not try to change your partner:** Remember that change must first come from within and unless your partner is willing, you cannot make them change. Strongly consider couples therapy to establish a common ground.
- **Do not put up with abuse:** Pushing, hitting, throwing things and making threats will not solve anything. If either partner expresses themselves violently or behaves cruelly, it is time to seek help.
- **Be willing to work:** Though it is not always possible, every marriage is worth saving, especially if children are involved. However, do not expect it to be easy. Ask your spouse if they are willing to work on your problems together.
- **Respect and love yourself:** If you are the kind to give in too easily or submit to your spouse's will, work on improving your self-esteem and standing up for your beliefs. Talk to a therapist.

Good marriages take work. Make yours a priority. Try to resolve matters faster by learning and practicing good communication techniques. Look for opportunities to rediscover each other. Take a relaxing, intimate vacation together and try to be more creative, spontaneous and playful in your gestures of love and affection. Try to appreciate the small, often overlooked things your partner does for you.

Marriage S.O.S.

If you need help resolving your marital conflicts, consider these options:

- **Marriage counseling:** Some experts believe that roughly half of all married couples need couples counseling to achieve marital satisfaction. About 75 percent of people receiving marital or couples therapy have indicated that their relationships improved, according to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

- **A marriage-skills course:** Marriage classes and seminars teach relationship-building techniques and skills training.
- **A marriage support group:** These groups offer the substantial benefit of group counseling and networking.
- **A marriage retreat:** Local churches, clubs and other organizations may offer these structured weekend getaways and programs.
- **Marriage self-help books:** Experts say that the more marriage education a couple has, the better chance they have of maintaining a healthy relationship.

Resources

- National Healthy Marriage Resource Center: www.twoofus.org
- American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy: www.aamft.org

Here when you need us.

Call: 844-506-5374

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: MontanaEAP

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