

Diffuse Conflict in Your Marriage With These 2 Helpful Hints

In marriage, before you solve a problem, make sure you hear each other's heart. This means discussing the feelings you have about the problem—even surrounding something as insignificant as criticizing how one prefers to fold socks can make someone feel disrespected, unheard, unimportant or misunderstood. Finding the feelings is part of hearing the heart of the other person. This can save you hours of arguing if you can hear one another's heart.

A second aspect of hearing the heart is trying to identify any symbolism of the event or anything you're in conflict about. Men can have symbols; however, my experience is women tend to have more symbols in their communication. If the man doesn't know he is dealing with a symbol, he's handicapped in the conversation and frustrated. She's also frustrated, because he doesn't understand the significance of the symbol.

For example, on Mother's Day, let's say your father-in-law always bought a corsage for his wife. In this family, the corsage became a symbol of honoring the wife for being a mother. Your wife, as a little girl, recognized this as a symbol: corsage equals honoring a woman for being a mom. You usually buy the corsage on Mother's Day, but this particular year, you forget. Your wife is really upset, and you're clueless; after all, in your mind, it's just a flower.

A corsage, my friend, is a symbol of honoring your wife, and you just dishonored her. So ask your wife if this is a symbol, and have her explain it to you. Can I give wives a tip here as well?

Your husband may be absolutely clueless to symbols and their

hidden or deeper meanings. When you don't disclose the symbol, he feels like you're playing a cruel game with him that he can't win. I get symbols only because I have counseled women for more than 20 years, but symbols aren't always rational, and if they're not disclosed, they'll significantly exacerbate a conflict. It can be that you yourself aren't aware of the significance of the symbol. While this is possible, it's also possible you know it's a symbol, so disclose it so your husband has an opportunity to understand you better, even if you think it makes little sense.

I'll never forget after a fairly significant conflict in our early marriage, Lisa disclosed a symbol to me. It's a long story how we come from two different take-out-the-garbage universes, but the bottom line is that Lisa disclosed that taking out the garbage really means that I love her. In other words, it's a symbol. Once I knew that, as crazy as it sounds, I took out the garbage for many years. Now she feels loved even if she takes the garbage out (symbols change and disappear). So, if there's a symbol, try to discover this to make your conflicts less painful.

Another suggestion about conflict I would give you both is to find the buttons. When in conflict, if your spouse is giving you a Level 20 response for a Level 2 issue, you have found a hot-button issue. Buttons, unlike symbols, usually make more sense.

Here's an example: A man gets loud, and his wife gets really scared or even shuts down. When you understand she was regularly physically abused after her dad escalated, this button makes sense. I will never forget a particular guy in my office. Every time his wife made a request, his body got tight, and he would say, "You're not going to control me." His mother viciously controlled him as a child and teenager, so when his wife would make suggestions to him, a button was pushed.

In conflict, when a button is pushed, that person may be too irrational to process the button at that moment because they are responding from their past and not their present. You might want to exit this conflict right away: "We're getting too upset right now; let's address this in an hour or tomorrow." When the person is calm, ask about earlier times they felt like this or what situation in their childhood this reminds them of.

Identifying a button can save a lot of wear and tear in your marriage. If the button continues, seek out a counselor to help you heal that hurt so it doesn't infect the marriage during conflict. Conflict is challenging enough without buttons. {eoa}

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