

How You Can Use Conflict as a Bridge to Marital Intimacy

Fights where you or your spouse use words or fists (or anything else) to hurt or manipulate the other are damaging. But it's just as damaging to give in or become a doormat hoping to secure peace at any cost. Two human beings who are married *will* experience conflict. Rightly viewed, you can leverage that kind of conflict in your marriage to end up closer together.

Conflict means you and your spouse see things differently. It's not the presence of conflict that eats away at your marriage; it's what you do about it. When conflict arises, you can erupt in anger, beating your spouse up verbally or physically. Or you can stuff the conflict under the proverbial rug, hoping it will go away. Both of those options guarantee the issue will arise again, perhaps with even more vitriol.

But rightly viewed, conflict provides an important opportunity to come closer together. Without conflict, you'd never know what issues need work. Going through conflict *can* be a positive thing for your relationship *if* you leverage it wisely.

Very few people learn to handle conflict well before getting married. Most people need to learn it in the middle of the relationship. Here's how to extract important value from the less-than-peaceful moments in your marriage.

Why You Need Conflict

If you and your spouse were identical, one of you would be unnecessary. God provides marriage as one incredibly useful way to teach us how to love well. And conflict is a part of that process.

Here are some positive things conflict can lead to:

1. **Seeing things differently.** You have blind spots that your spouse may see much more clearly. Whether it's some spinach caught between your front teeth, or the critical and angry way you come across in a social situation, having a spouse mirror a different perspective back to you is valuable. You might pay lots of money to hear about different perspectives on business, family, home, politics, life or spiritual growth from someone else; why not welcome them from your spouse?
2. **Being stimulated to change.** It only takes paying a little attention and you'll notice aspects of your own attitudes, words, behavior or character that negatively affect your spouse. Your own responses to your spouse's behavior can bring to light wounds of your own that still need healing. Living with someone in marriage makes it increasingly uncomfortable to remain the same. The laboratory of marriage shows you where you need transformation.
3. **Learning to love well.** If loving well were easy, everyone would do it. Loving well is not weak, and sometimes it's complicated. Certain professions (such as those serving people desperately in need) and parenting *can*, for some people, teach them how to love well. But for all of us, marriage is the most important place that happens. And if there is no conflict, there's no incentive to learn what loving well even means.

How to Leverage Conflict

Clearly some marriages dissolve because of constant or unresolved conflict, while others settle for a miserable marriage detente. How can you leverage conflict so that growth and "loving well" happens?

These steps will help.

1. **Is this worth fighting for?** Learn to tell the difference between those things that are important, and those that aren't. Who does the dishes is probably not worth fighting over. Your spouse's pornography habit or your children's spiritual training deserve your effort to address. "Fighting for" may mean having difficult conversations (see below). It may mean setting difficult boundaries. Remember that your goal is not to change your spouse, but to work to make your relationship as healthy as possible.
2. **Have the difficult conversations.** Fighting is not the answer, and neither is the silent treatment. Learn the skill of having difficult conversations about money, sex or any other source of conflict. Do the work of learning how to listen well, express your thoughts without overwhelming emotion and seek understanding. If you tend to shut down or walk away, stretch yourself to stay engaged. If you tend to explode in anger, *stop*. Do the internal work necessary to become calm, listen and seek understanding. Get some help with this if you need to.
3. **Seek understanding.** Unless your spouse has an evil heart, your spouse is not the enemy. Seeking to understand each other will almost always help you move toward a solution. See yourselves as attacking the problem from the same side, not fighting against each other. Doing so can help you understand both your own heart better, as well as your spouse.
4. **Attack the problem, not the person.** In the heat of conflict, this can be difficult. That's why letting emotions cool somewhat can often be helpful. Learn the skill of doing just that; getting past the heat and coming back to work on the problem. Your attitude and your words can help enlist your spouse in doing the same.

Conflict is not fun, but it can be valuable. Peace at any cost is not peace. Learn to leverage the conflict in your marriage

to build your relationship and come closer together.

Your Turn: *Have you avoided conflict in your marriage at any cost? Is constant conflict destroying your relationship? How can you shift your focus to leverage the conflict that happens to create something positive? Leave a comment below. {eoa}*

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