



Living Letters

Thoughts for Christian Living

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Marital Conflict. Is your marriage filled with harsh words, feelings and distance? Do you dread discussing disagreements and problems with your spouse? Does talking about it only make things worse? If so, then you may have fallen into the trap of poor conflict resolution. Sometimes, the solution is the problem. The way we go about resolving our problems may create more problems and resolve nothing.

Perhaps, some conflict in marriage is a given. Nonetheless, all marriages would be more successful and happier with a better approach to conflict resolution.

Behaviors to avoid. In conflict resolution Criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stone-walling are some of the destructive behaviors couples must avoid. Criticism and contempt tend to elicit defensiveness and stone-walling (withdrawal).

For example, a husband may want to express to his frustration with her habitual tardiness. He may say to her, "We are always late because of you." This is a criticism. Feeling criticized or blamed, the wife may become defensive, perceiving that she has been attacked. The grade school girl inside her may

want to reply, "I'm rubber and you're glue, what you say bounces off me and sticks to you." The grown up in her will say, "Well, if you ever helped me with the children, then I would have more time to get ready!" Thus, the cycle of negativity is set.

Behaviors to adopt in conflict resolution. Adopt a softer approach. Turn criticisms into complaints. A criticism is personal: "You are an idiot!" A complaint simply states the problem without placing blame or impugning one's character.

For example, a wife who tends to be critical may turn her criticism into a complaint: We need some milk. Would you run to the store, or would you stay with the kids while I go and get some milk?" Her husband is less likely to become defensive or withdraw in response to a complaint. But, if the wife says, "You forgot the milk, you idiot!" then the husband will likely feel attacked and respond defensively.

Solomon says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

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