

BEYOND THE STALEMATE

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Summer Issue of Sandspur Magazine 2007

A significant number of couples complain about the lack of communication in their marriage, sometimes occurring as soon as the limousine drives away from the wedding. After arguing over an issue with no clear answer of whose opinion is “right” they withdraw from each other and resentment continues to build. The argument may not even be related to the real underlying issue(s) and the wall between them becomes seemingly impenetrable.

If this pattern continues, loneliness and unhappiness is their only shared emotional experience. Even if neither partner thought they would ever consider the possibility, infidelity becomes a risk. Divorce may even be considered or used as a threat in arguments. Through this degradation of the relationship, the self worth of one or both partners often suffers and susceptibility to depression or other conditions increases.

The first crucial step to steering a marriage successfully back on track is breaking the fighting cycle. The couple cannot move forward to address the true problems until the fighting stops. To do this, they are wise to remember the seven deadly habits that have to be avoided or broken. These are:

- * criticizing * nagging *threatening
- * blaming * punishing * bribing
- * complaining

These include withdrawing, having to “be right,” and unbridled expressions (particularly ones that you know will push the partner’s “buttons,” and will escalate behavior)

This will calm the situation, but this is only the first step on the right path, so it is important to understand that the couple is not out of the woods. Often, they have merely stepped back to regroup and the true issues have not been resolved. Negative emotions can persist and it is critical that each partner does not feel as though they are being walled off, withdrawn, or are subject to the silent treatment. This will fuel more feelings of resentment and hostility and can help perpetuate the negative cycle. Remember, saying nothing is merely a *stalemate*, and there is no winner. Couples still need to talk and resolve issues without fighting. This can only be accomplished by changing the goal of conversation from winning (goal of a fight) to cooperation (goal of marriage).

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Sometimes this takes having an objective person that does not take either partner's "side," or a therapist trained in marriage counseling present to get to the root cause(s).

Of course, it is not necessary to have a third person there, as long as the couple can change the patterns or the goal of communication. For example, instead of **cooperating to fight** they need to **cooperate to get along**. They must change *HOW* they communicate.

In our practice we have found that the following three concepts have been successful in helping couples break the argument pattern:

- ❖ Use of a five minute conversation
- ❖ Changing a complaint into a request
- ❖ And, the "smoker's breath," or "yoga breathing"

First, a couple might want to begin with a five minute conversation (so that it cannot get out of hand) using some explicit rules. This is what we call "three, five minute conversations" over the course of a week. The rules guiding this conversation are:

1. The couple sets three dates in a week to sit down for a friendly talk (remember the goal is cooperation) for 5 minutes. For instance Monday, Wednesday and Friday in the kitchen at 7 p.m.
2. Only one person speaks each time. The wife might go on Monday, the Husband on Wednesday and the wife again on Friday. Or vice versa, it doesn't matter.
3. The couple must sit back to back when they talk so that they cannot read the other's facial gestures. The goal is listening to the other.
4. The listening spouse says NOTHING. Instead, the idea is for the listening spouse to merely accept what the other has said.
5. When the couple switches on the next date, the speaking spouse is not to rebut what has been said already. The idea is to exchange friendly information about each other.
6. The couple is not allowed to use any of the seven deadly habits mentioned previously in the conversation.

This technique often works to slow down the conversation, to exchange many ideas, and to become friends again.

Second, when problem solving is a needed, a smart couple turns a complaint into a request. It is, in general, much more effective to say, "Honey, the trash is piling up, I'm concerned about the smell. Will you please take it out?" rather than, "You always let the trash pile up! You never take it out! I always have to do it!" When a

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spouse catches him or herself complaining about the other, there is a hidden request. Smart couples learn how to make effective requests rather than complain.

The third idea to help couples change to a goal of cooperation is a smoker's or yoga breath. If one spouse misbehaves and starts to bring up tough issues using the deadly habits, it is not smart for the other spouse to become reactive. If the receiving spouse does become reactive then the couple can instantly become in a fight! The idea of the smoker's, or yoga breath is for the receiving spouse to inhale for four counts, hold for six counts and exhale for six (4-6-6). This will slow down the conversation and put the situation on pause so you can think of a useful response. It may be helpful at this time to listen for the hidden request in the complaining.

These are just a few of the techniques couples can use to learn to cooperate and partner instead of fight. Smart couples find ways to gain cooperation using positive communication skills. It can be done if the couple can stay rational, follow the concepts discussed above, and they don't start or fall back into the old fighting patterns. Some couples simply have a hard time staying out of a fight and might need a trained unbiased professional therapist to help keep the situation balanced and neutral. Many couples who do *not* currently have negative communication issues work hard to prevent the development of bad habits. They may use the principles discussed and/or a trained professional as a proactive measure to ensure a solid marriage relationship. Effective communication is based on cooperation, encouragement, and make your marriage not your self a priority.

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