Fighting Fair in Love and Marriage
by Lynn H. Turner, Ph.D

I’ve always been curious about why people (myself included at times) believe that conflict signals problems in a relationship, while the absence of conflict indicates successful relational communication. Whenever I ask my classes whether there’s anyone who enjoys a “good conflict,” the vast majority of my students stare at me in disbelief. Not only are there very few people who’ll admit they like engaging in conflict, but most of the class cannot fathom the phrase “good conflict.” They’re convinced that all conflict is bad.

This is a belief commonly held by Americans. We shy away from conflict because we think it’s wrong, negative, and generally unpleasant. This is concerning because adults in the U.S. report experiencing the most conflict in their marriages, relative to other relationships they have. So, if we dislike conflict but experience it a lot in marriage, what does that tell us about our feelings of comfort in marital communication?

Conflict can bring good

I think it suggests that we need to appreciate the good that can come from conflict, and we need to use conflict skills that maximize those positive outcomes. Of course, that is easier said than done because conflict is defined as experiencing incompatible activities or incompatible goals. When we’re not “in sync” with our partner (or we’re incompatible) that can be scary and disconcerting—we don’t know what will happen next and we may not get what we want.

We can learn to think positively. We can mentally “reframe” conflict as opportunity or challenge instead of scary. We can recognize that solutions come from spirited interactions between people who disagree. We can acknowledge that avoiding “groupthink,” a false harmony where we agree to avoid conflict, is in fact a healthy way to behave in marriage. When you have a strongly-held opinion or belief, it’s important to share that with your partner. Marriage is, after all, the relationship where you are most “known” to another. If you refrain from speaking up to avoid conflict, you are denying your partner the chance to really know you.

CPR for communication skills

In addition to believing that conflict can be positive, however, it’s also critical to learn communication skills for productive conflict. For a start, turn to CPR, which stands for Check-ins, Positivity, and Relational reminders. Check-ins require both partners asking one another periodically, “How are you doing?” It’s important to both the process and aftermath of conflict, for partners to feel cared for. When checking in you may discover that it would be useful to take a time out and come back to the conflict later or that one of you just wants to talk uninterrupted and have the other listen. Check-ins help keep the conflict process caring and productive.
Positivity refers to research showing that people in happy marriages have just as much conflict as couples who are unhappy, but happily married people are more positive while fighting. John Gottman, a psychologist, says that maintaining a ratio of 5:1 (five positive comments for every one negative) in conflict is a way to maintain marital satisfaction despite the presence of conflict.

One way to establish the 5:1 ration is through relational reminders. Relational reminders are comments made during conflict that indicate although you disagree you still love your partner. Relational reminders can consist of calling a partner by a nickname connoting affection, simply saying, “You know I love you,” or reminding your partner how long you’ve been together and how much you’ve been through.

Conflict in marriage is inevitable, but it is not inevitably negative or destructive. Thinking and acting positively help us reap the rewards of conflict.

Questions for Discussion

• How do I feel about conflict? What has my past taught me about disagreements?
• What are the areas of conflict in my marriage?
• What is my response to those conflicts? Can I use the CPR principle?
• While in his greatest hour of conflict, Jesus allowed God to “lead the way,” without knowing what he was to face. When was the last time you agreed to disagree, resting in the faith of your partner?

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