

What's All the Fuss About?

Areas of Conflict

Have you ever experienced a disagreement, difference of opinion, or misunderstanding with your spouse? If you answer truthfully, the answer will almost certainly be, "Yes, of course." Conflict in marriage is inescapable. All marital relationships—even the best ones—will experience at least some conflict from time to time.

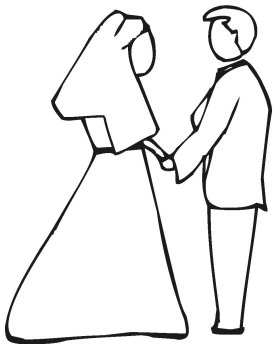
However, many people are successful and happy in their marriages, despite the conflicts that arise. The key to their success is how they handle their conflicts and disagreements. This information sheet explores common areas of contention in marriage, gender differences in communication styles, and the importance of healthy conflict management.

Common Areas Of Conflict

Although all relationships are different, spouses frequently experience several common areas of conflict. Here are brief descriptions of some typical issues that spark conflict in marriage.

Money

Regardless of the amount of money a couple has, it is often the biggest source of marital conflict. Husbands and wives often have very different ideas about how money should be handled because they have experienced different family values and goals regarding money. Potential disagreements about money include how to spend it, how much to save, and who should be responsible for paying the bills. It is important for spouses to discuss their values and feelings about money so each partner can try to understand the other. Creating a budget and financial planning often require negotiation and compromise,



but they are important tasks that help spouses identify their priorities and goals for the future.

In-laws

Conflicts over in-laws are usually most problematic in the first years of marriage. A common issue that arises is one partner feeling that his or her in-laws are too critical or intrusive. Husbands and wives may disagree about the length and frequency of their parents' visits. Some people may also feel that their spouse is too dependent upon his or her parents. All of these in-law issues can trigger conflict within the family. Spouses can deal with in-law problems by sharing their feelings and discussing what kind of relationship they would like with their in-laws. It is important to avoid being accusatory and speaking critically of one's in-laws, especially during such talks. Expressing negativity towards in-laws tends to worsen the situation because it alienates spouses from each other and promotes defensiveness.

Sex

Sex is an emotion-filled issue, and many spouses are afraid of getting hurt or rejected by their partners in this area. Thus, people frequently avoid discussing their feelings and expectations about sex. Even when partners do talk about sexuality issues, they are often embarrassed and speak indirectly about their feelings. These patterns can lead to conflict in the marital relationship. Difficulties with sex often reflect problems in other areas of the marriage as well. In order for couples to resolve conflicts about sexual matters, it is crucial that they communicate directly and specifically about their needs and desires.

Many people feel very vulnerable in this area, so it is important that the discussion be done in a gentle, loving manner.

Children

Child rearing is a time-consuming task that requires huge amounts of energy. It's easy for spouses to become frustrated with each other over this issue. Husbands and wives often have conflicting views about how to parent because they were raised differently. Agreement about the best way to raise children may not always be possible, so it is necessary that spouses learn to compromise and negotiate in this area. Whatever decisions and rules parents make, it is important that they be united in front of their children. Otherwise, the children will learn to play one parent off the other, further contributing to marital disharmony.

Gender Differences in Conflict

Due to a combination of social and biological factors, men and women have different styles of interacting and handling conflict. Women raise concerns and problems far more often than men do. Men are more likely to avoid conflict and downplay the strong emotions that they feel inside. When men close down and suppress their feelings, women often become more insistent that they discuss the issues that have been raised. At this point, however, men only want to withdraw further. These different ways of interacting can lead to frustration and misunderstandings.

In order to overcome frustration with communication styles, it is essential that both husbands and wives improve their methods of dealing with conflict. Wives need to make sure that they bring up issues gently and in a positive, non-confrontational manner. A soft, gentle approach in introducing a topic for discussion usually has a greater chance of leading to a satisfactory solution for both partners. Husbands need to respond to their wives' concerns and complaints in a respectful manner. They can learn to recognize when their wives need to talk and take a more active role in resolving issues instead of withdrawing. It is each partner's responsibility to respect and honor his or her spouse and make an effort to communicate as effectively as possible.

The Importance Of Managing Conflict Well

Although some conflict is unavoidable, it is critical that spouses manage their differences in constructive ways. There are several reasons for this. First, if husbands and wives do not handle conflict effectively, it is likely that negativity will increasingly become part of their relationship. As unresolved conflict and negativity grow in a marriage, the good aspects of the relationship often diminish and partners become disenchanted with each other. Second, research has shown that when spouses are unhappy in their marriages they tend to experience more physical and emotional problems than do happily married couples. People who are satisfied with their marriage even tend to live longer than those in unhappy marriages.

This finding leads to a third reason why it is important for spouses to manage their conflict well. A strong and satisfying marriage establishes a firm foundation from which spouses can function. When the quality of marriage is positive and supportive, partners can better attend to their personal responsibilities and obligations. A strong marriage also provides people with a greater opportunity to develop their personalities and talents than does an unhappy union. Although marriage requires a considerable amount of time and effort, it is crucial that partners care for their own needs and development as well. They can best do this when the relationship is warm and encouraging and they know how to handle marital conflict effectively.

Finally, it is essential that spouses practice good conflict management skills for the sake of their children. Not all conflict is bad for children to see. Negative conflict and hostility are extremely harmful to children's well-being. Many studies have shown that this form of marital conflict leads to poor outcomes in children, such as decreased self-esteem, greater stress and anxiety, low achievement at school, and behavioral problems. Conversely, positive conflict, in which partners are respectful to one another and a solution is reached, serves as a model and helps children learn how to have conflict appropriately. Thus, it is important that spouses learn to manage their disagreements effectively, as this will help foster the well-being of themselves and their children.