

I. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL VIEW OF CONFLICT (AND CLOSENESS) IN MARRIAGE

Intimacy is the deepest thirst of the human soul. We die a bit, in our souls, without it.

--Psychologist Chris Thurman ¹

During a... survey, 100 divorce lawyers were asked the question, "What is the major cause of divorce in American marriages?" All 100 lawyers agreed that a breakdown in marital communication was the leading cause of divorce. Every meaningful relationship requires significant communication.

--From an article in Home Life magazine ²

The number one predictor of divorce is the habitual avoidance of conflict.... Successful couples are those who know how to discuss their differences in ways that actually strengthen their relationship and improve intimacy. Successful couples don't let their disagreements contaminate the rest of the relationship.... Often couples are so determined to avoid disagreeing that they quit speaking.

--Therapist Diane Solee, Founder of "Smart Marriages" Seminars ³

II. HEALTHY VS. UNHEALTHY CONFLICT IN MARRIAGE

Marriage is certainly sweeter without conflict, but any therapist knows conflict is common in marriage. "If two people live together they will experience conflict," one psychologist writes, adding, "Sincere and genuine conflict can promote clarification, respect, and increased understanding. When conflict is resolved in a healthy, honest, and respectful manner the result can strengthen and solidify the relationship."⁴

What do we know about the types of marital conflict? Marital conflicts can be categorized into two major types:

The first is a conflict that, though it may be intense and disruptive, the couple desires to honor the commitment they made... and want to work through their problems. Their level of care for each other or belief and desire to be in the relationship may exist at various levels. But they are willing to work through personal hurts and failed expectations in order to heal the marriage. The nature of the conflict may comprise difficulty in perceptions, communication skills, and external stressors but fundamentally the two want to preserve their marriage.

The second category would comprise relationship problems due to one or both partners wanting out of the relationship. The core conflict here is between one or both partners and the commitment to be married. Though there may be understandable and justifiable reasons for the union to come under question, for the committed couple, these circumstances do not cause them to want to end the relationship. So, in essence, you have one dyad of people who, regardless of the conflict, are willing to improve the relationship. In the other, regardless of the problems or the skills of the couple one or both no longer want to be in the marriage or believe they can remain in the marriage. The question becomes, "Can the relationship work?" regardless of the conflict. Hence, the central question of dealing with marital conflicts is not a matter of all the various kinds of conflicts that can exist, rather it is whether or not the couple want to make the marriage work and suspend their beliefs about it not working. Commitment in the marriage is the ultimate question in marital conflict.⁵

What causes conflict in marriage? Every therapist who works with couples has his or her philosophy on the subject. Psychologist Richard Morey lists these factors:

- Differing expectations about roles and responsibilities
- Feeling disrespected, devalued or dishonored
- Differing loyalties toward family or friends
- Feeling unloved or uncared for
- Feeling misunderstood⁶

Other sources of conflict include different interests, goals, desires or expectations that are not compatible, and perceptions that the spouse disputes or does not value one's "goal-directed" behavior. But conflict does not have to arise if the couple skillfully moves from a clash in styles or priorities to "opportunities for cooperative interaction."⁷

One behavioral scientist observes that "Not all conflicts are overt,"⁸ meaning that conflict can be expressed in ways that are hidden, or even interpreted by one of the spouses as a virtue instead of a fault (thus negating the issue of conflict). This writer suspects that such an attitude will eventually reverse itself! But some marriage specialists teach that it is possible to have conflict without hostility. We will see later,

in the “Interventions” part of this paper, that couples can work through intense difficulties and differences of opinion without becoming angry at each other.

The same writer states that “Conflict is invariably conceptualized in relation to goals.... All behavior is goal directed.”⁹ His theory is that, because everything we do is aimed at a desired goal, conflict erupts in interpersonal relationships when we are prevented from attaining our goals. This has obvious implications in marriage. We will see, later in this paper, how this theory is applied in therapeutic interventions.

What are the consequences of conflict in marriage? One reviewer of psychological research found that (unresolved and severe) marital conflict leads to consequences that involve destruction of mental health, physical health, family health and chemical abuse or dependency.¹⁰

Behavioral scientists have done extensive research into predicting which couples will divorce (or, stated more accurately, what characteristics are shown by couples that eventually divorce). John M. Gottman, Ph.D. finds that there are “Seven Bad Habits” of unsuccessful marriages:

- More negativity than positivity in the emotional life of the marriage (at a rate five times greater than occurs in the healthy marriage).
- The “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Criticism, Defensiveness, Contempt, and Stonewalling) and male-female differences in these behaviors (men stonewall; women criticize).
- Failure of attempts to repair the marriage. (The goal of therapy, he writes, is not to avoid fights but to help couples work through their fights and eventually to repair while fighting.)
- Negative perceptions in the view of the history the couple shares as well as the present relationship.
- “The Cascade” of progressively destructive events and behaviors, involving flooding, distancing and isolating in the relationship.
- Chronic physiological arousal (measurable increases in blood pressure and other physical symptoms of stress) during the couple’s interactions.
- Failure of males to accept their wives’ influence, leading to either emotional disengagement or the male’s escalation (belligerence, contempt, defensiveness) in reaction to the wife’s complaining.¹¹

Psychologists Scott Stanley and Howard Markham compiled the following list of factors that are related to an increased risk of divorce, from a number of studies by other behavioral scientists:

- Wife’s employment and income.
- Neuroticism in one or both spouses.

- Premarital cohabitation.
- Physiological arousal prior to problem-solving discussions.
- Parental divorce.
- Previous divorce of the husband.
- Communication positivity vs. negativity (greater negative than positive).
- Religious differences.
- “Conflicted” type of relationship.
- Not combining finances.
- Knowing one another only a short time before marriage.
- Young age at the time of marriage.
- Low in terms of conscientiousness.
- Lack of support for the marriage by family and friends.
- Greatly different attitudes.¹²

What are the characteristics of an unhealthy approach to conflict in marriage?

- Dr. John Gottman presents the “Core Triad” of unhealthy marriages: (1) a greater amount of negative than positive behaviors; (2) Tendency to see the marriage as more bad than good; (3) Physiological arousal (increased heart rate, blood pressure, and subjective reports of feeling stressed in the marriage), leading to negative perceptions of the marriage.¹³
- Overall negativity, reciprocating of negative behavior, sustained negative interaction, and escalating of negative interactions.^{14 15}
- A “Win-Lose” mentality, in which one must win and one must lose discussions.¹⁶
- An “Approach and Avoidance” style of relating, in which one spouse becomes confused, upset and angry but might not know why, so backs away to avoid conflict; the other spouse, troubled by the withdrawal pushes for a discussion of the problem. The first spouse retreats further, increasing the conflict in the other and “their behavior (approach, avoidance) provokes the opposite response in one another.”¹⁷
- Mishandling five cognitive processes that affect marital functioning. All couples show these processes in their interactions, but “distressed” couples do these more often and with greater destructiveness: (1) *Selective Attention*—disagreement about what actually occurs in the marriage¹⁸ because they cannot objectively view their relationship and tend to see their interactions negatively¹⁹; (2) *Attributions*—interpreting or labeling a mate’s behaviors as being negative—distressed couples tend to make negative attributions, while healthy couples tend to make positive ones^{20 21}; (3) *Expectations*—negative ones are correlated with negative behavior, negative attributions²² and depression,²³ while positive ones are linked to positive attributions about the spouse²⁴ and positive marital adjustment²⁵; (4) *Assumptions*—what people believe about male and female roles and about their spouse’s ability to change affects marital functioning, in other words, “the more people believe that their spouses cannot change, and the more they believe disagreement is destructive, the lower their expectancy that their relationship could improve with therapy”²⁶; and (5) *Standards*—the couple’s concept or expectations of what the spouse and the marriage should be like. The amount of dissatisfaction is directly related to how a person’s expectations about his/her spouse and marriage are met in the relationship.²⁷
- More frequent use of negative statements, fewer positive statements, and greater frequency of negative behavior when the couple is in problem-solving or other types of situations.²⁸

- Unhealthy attachment styles, which I understand to mean that when one insecure person marries another insecure person, the patterns of their interactions (struggles over meeting neurotic dependency needs and struggles for control) lead to a very unstable relationship.²⁹
- Uncertain commitment, which leads to a weakening of the marital relationship and a “shorter-term perspective and preference for a quid pro quo or exchange orientation in which immediate reciprocation of positive behavior is expected and feelings of exploitation are experienced when help is not reciprocated.”³⁰
- A sense of powerlessness in the decision-making of the marriage, especially in areas that are important to the spouse.³¹

What are the characteristics of a healthy approach to conflict in marriage?

- Being willing to forgive and be forgiven.³²
- Healthy “attachment” styles, in which the couple tends to compromise and consider personal as well as the spouse’s interests when problem solving.^{33 34}
- Solid commitment to the marriage and to each other. Researchers found that a strong commitment to one’s marriage is directly related to healthier, more constructive responses to “negative partner behavior.”^{35 36}
- Healthy understanding of self and satisfaction regarding one’s decision-making power in areas that are important to one’s spouse.³⁷
- Partner’s verification of one’s view of self seems to impact one’s satisfaction in marriage.³⁸
- Working to significantly decrease negative reactions to each other’s behaviors.³⁹
- “Accommodative” behavior (which I interpret as lovingly caring one’s spouse and for the relationship) prior to any interaction that involves conflict.⁴⁰

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS FOR CONFLICTED MARRIAGES

For couples who are not extremely conflicted, psychologist Chris Thurman⁴¹ recommends therapists provide clients with a simple handout regarding 11 emotional needs people have:

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|---|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attention | <input type="checkbox"/> Acceptance | <input type="checkbox"/> Appreciation (regarding behaviors) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical Affection | <input type="checkbox"/> Comfort | <input type="checkbox"/> Affirmation (regarding character) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Encouragement | <input type="checkbox"/> Respect | <input type="checkbox"/> Security |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Support | <input type="checkbox"/> Understanding | |

Dr. Thurman asks the husband and wife to select which three needs are most significant to him/her. He then asks them to choose which three are most important to his/her spouse. Then he has the couple discuss their selections and why they chose them. A healthy couple will gain understanding and empathy for what is needed in the emotional life of their marriage. This exercise can be a starting point for improving communication between husband and wife. Dr. Thurman also works with the couple, one at a time, in this way:

- What is the pain you experience in your marriage?
- Which emotional need is not being met in the marriage?
- Can you hear your spouse's need?
- Commit to meet that need, through agape love and action—to love in specific ways, as needed by your husband/wife.

Couples who are moderately conflicted respond well to the Social Learning approach to counseling, which begins with an in-depth assessment progresses step-by-step through a series of structured exercises to improve daily interactions and the couple's communication style. Inherent in this approach is the *quid pro quo* concept ("something for something"), which emphasizes behavioral exchanges between husband and wife ("I will do this for you if you will do that for me"). The underlying value is that marriage is much like a business, in which there are contracts and mutual trades that are of value to each of the partners. The therapist teaches the couple to use a "structured communication" technique: one speaks while one listens; after a few minutes the listener repeats what was said; then the listener becomes the speaker and his/her mate listens; during these respectful interactions, holding hands or touching each other's knees (speaking face to face and being attentive to one's tone of voice) is encouraged. The technique is quite successful and has been adapted for use in other types of marital therapy. Another technique, called "Caring Days," helps the couple, in a positive manner, to state individual wants and needs, set measurable behavioral goals for the marriage, experience positive "exchanges" of giving and receiving in the marriage, and ultimately build a deeper commitment to each other.⁴²

Highly conflicted or discouraged couples are usually not able or willing to learn new communication skills to improve their marriages, whether in couples counseling or in a marriage enrichment format. Counselors get better results with such couples working individually with each person, to concentrate on developing problem-solving skills, defuse highly charged destructive emotions ("negative affect"), and increase healthy feelings ("positive affect") in the marital relationship.⁴³ Once those skills are established, the couple can come together for marital counseling with a better chance of success.

One psychologist advocates forgiveness as an effective intervention, whether the couple in treatment is relatively healthy or very conflicted in their marriage:

Forgiveness is a buffer that potentially reduces the effects of negative marital events on the ratio of positive behaviors to negative behaviors, the offended spouse's perceptions of the relationship, and the offended spouse's physiological arousal. When an offended spouse forgives, the likelihood of responding with relationship-constructive behavior increases, and the likelihood of responding with relationship-destructive behavior decreases.... These behavioral changes directly contribute to maintaining a high ratio of positive behaviors to negative behaviors. A spouse who desires to respond in relationship-constructive ways to hurtful behavior is also more likely to perceive the relationship as positive, rather than negative. Finally, a disposition to pursue a relationship-constructive course of action is likely to lead to reductions in physiological arousal....

Research seems to support the proposal that forgiveness promotes marital stability.... We have found evidence that when people forgive someone who has hurt them, that forgiveness is accompanied by increases in their empathy for the people who hurt them. We think that enhancing empathy may be a way to help spouses become more forgiving.⁴⁴

Critics of "forgiveness" in therapy suggest that it merely enables the offending spouse to build an array of excuses for hurtful behaviors. But developing empathy and helping offended spouses to learn to practice forgiveness is not aimed at keeping the wrongdoer from taking responsibility for his/her actions.

The goal of therapists who advocate forgiveness, is

to promote empathy, and thus forgiveness, to prevent the hurts caused by the offending spouse's hurtful behavior from leading to an increased probability of flooding [overwhelming feelings of anger and resentment]. While there is certainly a place in marriage (and marital therapy) for assigning moral responsibility for the hurtful behavior of one's spouse... spouses should learn to ask themselves, "Do I want to make things bitter or better?" Their attributional activity plays a role in whether their relationship becomes bitter or better after hurtful events have occurred. Nevertheless, issues of guilt, responsibility, repentance, and the restoration of trust following hurtful marital events should certainly be discussed as complements to forgiveness.⁴⁵

Behavioral scientists who see all behavior as goal-directed apply marital intervention from a "goal perspective." For example, one spouse might have an "avoidance" goal to avoid feeling stupid or inferior—and might combine that goal with one that attacks in order to get even with his/her mate for certain behaviors. The goal is to act aggressively to reduce the partner's threatening behaviors, which in fact might only be minor criticism—but could result in verbally or physically aggressive attacks. In brief, the therapist's work is to help the couple see that what they really want in the relationship is not the repeated pattern of negative and destructive interpersonal behaviors in which they are locked, but "positive

goals” of closeness and intimacy. Therapy concentrates on establishing goals related to “relationship maintenance” in which each person shows concern for his/her partner and receives the caring he/she needs in return. Therapists have much work to do in changing established negative goals and helping the couple to develop positive, relationship-building goals. The essential steps of this goal-centered therapy include:

- Help the couple identify the avoidance goals that are at the heart of defensive behaviors (attacking, belittling, belligerence, or stonewalling) by giving them alternative self-protecting behaviors. These might include an assortment of self-enhancement strategies which, when used, tend to reduce or eliminate the patterns of conflict used by the couple.
- Increase both spouses’ understanding of what each person fears or is sensitive about. (This seems to mean that, by increasing each partner’s empathy for the other and strengthening each spouse’s “points of vulnerability,” the potential for destructive conflict is reduced.)
- Help the couple learn that their relationship constantly changes and grows, experiences both failures and successes, and needs each person’s help to develop in healthy ways. Therapists help the couple by teaching problem-solving skills and expecting them to resolve problems on their own, not just in therapy sessions.⁴⁶

Psychologist Everett Worthington does extensive research about marriage as well as marital therapy. He writes that therapy with conflicted couples is not merely about changing their communication styles and personality problems or solving their disagreements but also breaking up old problem-solving patterns and setting up new ones.

Treatment focuses on inhibiting power strategies and freeing the couple to interact more productively.... Almost all conflict-management programs are structured similarly—de-emphasizing the personality difficulties and overt power struggles and emphasizing conflict resolution. Changing conflict patterns involves the same three components as changing intimacy or communication: (1) helping couples become aware of whatever prevents them from resolving old problems; (2) breaking up old patterns; and (3) building new patterns.⁴⁷

Helping a couple change their established pattern of conflict is difficult because patterns are usually well-rehearsed and automatic. Changing requires patience, creativity and skill from the counselor. The counselor must divert the patterns of blame to attributions of causes of problems that are changeable. By focusing on the issues of disagreement, the counselor must help the couple into a pattern of conflict resolution that is advocated by neither. By helping the couple use new strategies to resolve their differences, the couple’s balance of power can be changed to where less conflict exists.⁴⁸

Two researchers developed a lengthy list that summarizes much of what has been presented in this paper concerning how to effectively resolve conflict.⁴⁹ Their recommendations, drawn from behavioral research findings such as those cited earlier, could be incorporated into therapy sessions with individuals and couples, to help people move toward a working model of resolving conflict:

Consideration

- Don't belittle, humiliate, or use character-degrading words about the other person
- Don't dismiss the other person's issue as unimportant
- Acknowledge and try to understand the other person's point of view
- Don't talk down to the other person; talk to him or her as an adult
- Don't blame the other person unfairly, or make unfair accusations
- Don't push your own point of view as the only right one; consider the other person
- Don't be sarcastic or mimic the other person
- Try to understand the other person's faults, and don't be critical or judgmental
- Don't hurt the other person
- Don't make the other person feel guilty
- Listen to the other person
- Don't talk too much or dominate the conversation
- Don't interrupt

Rationality

- Don't get angry
- Don't raise your voice
- Don't be aggressive or lose your temper
- Try and keep calm, and don't get upset
- Don't argue
- Don't bring up issues that tend to lead to arguments

Self-expression

- Keep to the point; don't get involved in other issues
- Get to the point quickly
- Be honest and say what's on your mind
- Be specific; don't generalize
- Clarify the problem
- Express your feelings about the topic
- Explain and justify events rather than deny their occurrence
- Be consistent
- Explain reasons for your point of view
- Don't exaggerate
- Think before you act, and don't make rash judgments

Conflict Resolution

- Explore alternatives
- Make joint decisions
- Explain reasons for your point of view
- Explain your feelings about the topic
- Be prepared to compromise

Be able to say you're sorry
Resolve the problem so that both people are happy with the outcome
Explain and justify events rather than deny their occurrence

Positivity

Try and relieve the tension in arguments (make appropriate jokes, laugh together)
Use receptive body language (for example, open body position)
Look at each other
Be supportive and give the other praise where due
Don't hurt the other person

To summarize, the psychological research concerning marital conflict is both extensive and diverse. The approaches recommended in this paper frequently do not agree as to what will best resolve conflict. But research literature offers a thoughtful counselor much that is good for helping couples who are unable to help themselves to resolve differences. Ideally, the counselor can help marriage partners work to accomplish peace and learn to handle conflict in healthy ways. But what does the Scripture tell us about resolving marital conflict?

IV. BIBLICAL OVERVIEW: HOW COUPLES CAN “PROTECT” THEIR MARRIAGES

A careful and thoughtful reading of the Bible, especially certain parts of the New Testament, can be very helpful to gain an understanding of what God requires of Christians in marriage. People who are motivated to follow God's lead can, with or without the help of counselors, establish and maintain a God-blessed marital relationship. Within the limits of this paper, I want to briefly highlight certain passages of the Word of God that speak directly or indirectly to godly love in marriage.

Christians are to use Scripture as their chief guideline for marriage. 1 Corinthians 7:3-4 teaches the “mutual submission” concept of marriage: “Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife.”

Ephesians chapter 5 provides the godly standard for all of our relationships, put forth in the context of “walking in love, as Christ also hath loved us” (verse 2). I suggest that this holy way of life with God and others is no less expected in the intimate bonds of Christ-centered marriage, because the exhortation to “submit yourselves *one to another* in the fear of God” (verse 21—emphasis mine) comes right before the instruction that “wives are to submit themselves to their husbands as unto the Lord (verses 22-24, 33), in respect and love.” The love of the husband for his wife is to be expressed “as Christ loved the church” (verse 25)—which is clearly a “servant” type of leadership, not a controlling style. The authority of Jesus in the life of His Bride, the Church, and the self-sacrificing love he has for her, are also required of the husband for his wife.

A companion passage is Colossians 3:18-19, which reads, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them.” The well-known and beloved chapter, 1 Cor. 13, gives us the teaching of spirit-filled love in all of our relationships (including marriage).

But as right and good as Christian marriage is supposed to be, all believers can be thankful for the fact of grace. We absolutely need to practice grace toward each other, because we all sin and thus do not live up to the teachings of God’s Word. Grace applied in marriage is a daily opportunity to experience what I call “forgiving as a way of living”—giving as well as receiving forgiveness. (See Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness and reconciliation in Matthew chapters 5 and 18.)

The biblical standard for communicating difficult things to each other (otherwise called “fair fighting”) is presented in James 1:19: “Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” This verse briefly and expertly summarizes the voluminous research findings of numerous behavioral scientists quoted in this paper, above.

What I term “the Tenderness Principle” is found in 1 Peter 3: 7 – “Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as being

heirs together of the grace of life; that your prayers be not hindered.” If we husbands truly honored our wives, Christian marriage counselors might need to find other work to do.

Although the teaching at the end of Romans 12 is specifically directed toward how to behave toward all men, verse 18 (“If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men”) clearly teaches believers to seek harmony in all relationships-- even, as we see in the final verses, with our enemies. (And who has not felt as if his/her spouse has been an “enemy” at times?)

Perhaps, because we will struggle with the tendency to sin (and to have conflict in marriage) as long as we live in this world, we will always need marriage counselors. But pastors and counselors can do amazing work in their teaching and preaching, when they seek to educate each Christian about the life-giving principles of Scripture—and how to apply the truth of God to the most intimate human relationship, which is marriage. And believers can be exhorted to practice “walking in love” with their spouses.

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