

GROWING TOGETHER THROUGH CONFLICT

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Theme: How to solve conflicts so that everyone wins.

Objective: To teach a theoretical model for conflict-resolution and provide couples with an opportunity to explore its effectiveness through case studies.

How to Use This Resource: This program idea can be used as part of a marriage retreat or as an individual program for family life education in the church. It affords an opportunity to include non-Adventist couples. Singles are welcome to attend, however much of the material as presented here is oriented toward married couples. With some adaptation, the material may be made more useful to singles. At the time of the problem-solving exercises, they should be paired with another individual.

Agree-Disagree Ice-breaker: This exercise will enable group members to become relaxed with each other and will stimulate interest in the topic. Designate one end (or side) of the room as "Agree" and the other as "Disagree." Read the following statements and ask participants to move either to the "Agree" end or the "Disagree" end, according to their convictions. Make no attempt to explain the statements or to answer any questions. When you are finished, tell the class that these are some of the issues you will be working through together.

1. Since the husband is the head of the household, decision-making rests with him.
2. The wife should make the decisions in her realm while the husband makes them in his.
3. All decisions should be made mutually.
4. In areas of disagreement, husband and wife should work together on a decision, each offering input that carries equal weight.
5. When a problem arises, husband and wife should explore alternatives until one is found that is acceptable to both of them.
6. The husband should always have the final word.
7. When a disagreement occurs, it is best to just be quiet so a fight or argument can be avoided.

Introduction

Our differences tend to pose barriers to close relationships. "We differ so widely in disposition, habits, education, that our ways of looking at things vary. We judge differently. Our understanding of truth, our ideas in regard to the conduct of life, are not in all respects the same. There are not two whose experience is alike in every particular. The trials of one are not the trials of another. The duties that one finds light, are to another most difficult and perplexing."—Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers*, p. 473.

The way we deal with our differences determines the quality of our marriages, our families and our other friendships. To accept differences with understanding and a willingness to make adjustments results in progressive growth toward intimacy. Otherwise, differences cause

disagreement. Disagreements can lead to anger and conflict. Unresolved anger and conflict can cause us to give up in the quest for oneness. This may be followed by resentment, bitterness, rebellion and alienation. Other individuals may live an existence of endless disputing, never settled. Some may work out a form of agreement by the capitulation of one of the partners to the other and a loss of his own personality. Or withdrawal may occur, with each person organizing his own life and becoming more and more secretive. (Cf. Paul Tournier, *To Understand Each Other*, p. 32.)

SMALL GROUP EXERCISE

Discover the differences in the lives of the following Bible couples in disposition, habits and values. What conflicts did they experience?

Michal and David (1 Sam. 18:20-28; 2 Sam. 6:16-23)

Rebekah and Isaac (Gen. 24:15-67; 27:1-46)

Hannah and Elkanah (1 Sam. 1:1—2:11)

How Shall We Deal With Conflict?

"It is our conflicts that clearly identify for us the vital adjustments we must make if our marriages are to become the intimate, loving, trusting relationships we want them to be."—David & Vera Mace, *We Can Have Better Marriages*, p. 91.

Couples typically manage conflict by *excluding* it, by *avoiding* it, or by resolving it. In some marriages one is in a position of power, control and decision-making over the other. Differences are suppressed; conflict is excluded. Others avoid conflict by dividing control and decision-making between husband and wife and by not discussing sensitive issues or sharing deep feelings.

Couples who seek deeper levels of intimacy endeavor to resolve conflict. They build up each other's sense of respect and personal worth. They open themselves in communication and attempt to understand each other's inner needs. They work to find a solution with which both are satisfied.

Steps to Creative Solutions to Conflict

(This material can be used as a mini-lecture in a seminar or small group.)

Think of the problem in terms of needs. Which partner has a need? The husband? The wife? Both? Think of the needs evident in the following problem situations.

Problem I: The wife has an extra choir practice because the choir, which is an important outlet for her, is planning a special Christmas concert. The children will have to be cared for.

Problem II: The husband has spilled milk on his suit. It must be dry-cleaned before Sabbath. He finds he cannot get it to the cleaners by the deadline.

Problem III: The family owns one car. The wife's schedule at home has been unusually hectic all week. Tonight she has been invited to a friend's house for a special social gathering honoring a retiring school teacher. She has promised to pick up a friend who needs transportation, but the husband learns of an after-hours appointment related to his work which requires him to be across town.

In Problem I, the wife's needs include:

a. To be a responsible member of the choir by keeping her commitments to the rehearsal

appointment.

- b. To have the opportunity for Christian service and personal enrichment which comes from singing in the choir.
- c. To learn her part well so as to avoid embarrassment to herself and the choir.

In Problem II, the husband's needs include:

- a. To be well-groomed in public, especially at Sabbath services.
- b. To avoid the embarrassment of wearing his dirty suit.
- c. To receive empathy and understanding because of his forgetfulness.
- d. To find some means of getting his suit cleaned by Sabbath.

In Problem III, the wife's needs include:

- a. To be faithful to her promises.
- b. To have a social outlet with friends.
- c. To express her thanks and appreciation for one who has been very important in the lives of her children.
- c. To relieve her fatigue and enjoy some recreation.

In Problem III, the husband's needs include:

- a. To fulfill responsibilities related to his work.
- b. To maintain good relationships with boss and fellow employees.
- c. To be a good provider for his family.
- d. To be punctual.

Remember that the needs in question are not always immediately evident. Behaviors are driven by internal emotional and psychological needs that are related to temperament, habit, culture, one's sense of self-worth or perhaps one's gender.

Make sincere attempts to accommodate each other when needs are expressed. Recognize that both husband and wife stand equal before God in terms of human worth and the right to dignity and respect. Ask yourself the question, "Is there any way I can accommodate him/her to show my respect and love?"

In Problem I, the husband might ask himself:

- a. Can I personally care for the children and relieve my wife of this responsibility?
- b. Can I arrange for a baby sitter?
- c. How can I let my wife know I appreciate her participation in the choir?

In Problem II, the wife might ask herself:

- a. Can I take the suit to the cleaners for him?
- b. Can I telephone and arrange for pickup and delivery?
- c. In what other ways can I help to meet his needs for a clean Sabbath suit?

When needs are in conflict, love and respect demand that a solution be found that accommodates both. The following steps will be helpful in arriving at such a mutually acceptable solution:

1. Pray together. Pray for guidance to work through the problem in a manner which leaves you close together, rather than driven apart. Do not pray for the surrender of your partner to your wishes or point of view, but rather that you may understand each other better.
2. Let each express their *internal* needs as clearly as they can to the other. Each should seek to listen for needs and feelings, repeating what he or she thinks they hear for clarification from the other. Needs and feelings should be accepted without being judged or rejected as unimportant. They are important to your partner! It may be helpful to write these needs down.
3. Write down as many ideas as you can for a solution. Determine to use your creative powers

together to find a way to accommodate one another. Try to find alternatives that satisfy the needs. Do not evaluate the alternatives at this time. Let each feel free to make suggestions to the list. Strive for at least 10 or more alternatives. Do not discard even those which seem farfetched, they may later become an integral part of a creative solution.

For example, in Problem III, the list of alternatives might look something like this:

- a. Husband or wife could use public transportation (bus, taxi).
- b. Husband could ride with a colleague or business associate.
- c. Husband could ask a friend to drive him.
- d. Wife could ask one of her friends to drive.
- e. Wife could choose to have the social event at her home.
- f. Husband could agree to cancel his plans for another evening so that the wife could have the car for a social outing with friends to somewhat make up for not being able to go tonight.
- g. The wife could drive the husband to his appointment before she leaves (or en route) and arrange to pick him up when his appointment is finished.
- h. The husband could drop his wife and her friends off at the social event and meet them when it is finished.
- i. They could borrow or rent a second car for the evening.
- j. Husband could decide not to go to his meeting.
- k. Wife could decide not to go to her meeting.
- l. They could both stay home and explain to their friends and colleagues the irresolvable nature of their problem.

Evaluate your solution possibilities to see if any one or any combination of them will meet the needs of both partners. If not, generate more possibilities. The fact that one or another of the solutions is not acceptable generally indicates that some need is not being satisfied by the solution. This can further help to clarify the internal needs. The important thing is not which alternative is chosen, but that both partners feel good about what has been worked out. *Make sure that each partner understands and feels good about the solution you have chosen.*

Thank God in prayer for His leading and help and the growth that has taken place in your relationship as you have endeavored to understand and accommodate each other.

Plan to evaluate the solution. If the problem involves more than a one-time situation (for example, the sharing of household duties), plan a time when the solution to the problem can be evaluated. You may decide to abandon it and start over, to modify it, or to keep it the same. You may even discover that the problem has evaporated.

An Exercise for Couples

In each of the following, list what you think are the wife's needs and the husband's needs. Suggest alternatives, then choose the alternative which would satisfy these needs were you in the place of this couple. Share what you learned from doing this exercise together.

Situation I: Lloyd's mother did everything for him from straightening his tie to picking up his underwear and pajamas. Janet, after only a month of marriage has grown weary with reminding and picking up. Lloyd enters the bedroom in mid-afternoon and wants to know why it's still a mess.

Situation II: Sue, who likes to wear the latest fashions, returns from a shopping trip with several unexpected outfits. Doug, reared in a home where every penny was pinched, knows that they have already overspent their limit and tells her she cannot keep them.

Situation III: Barry's parents, who live in the same town as Barry and Donna, have telephoned at the last minute to say they're dropping by for dinner. Donna, reminding Barry that they've invited

themselves in this manner for three weeks in a row, complains that they show little respect for her. Barry feels he can do nothing about it.

Summary

The ways in which we handle problems and conflicts affect us individually and as couples. They also affect our families who must live in the environment we create. To ignore or avoid coping with a problem may reveal areas of insecurity or insensitivity where growth is needed. To take responsibility for problem-solving in your own hands implies that ones partner's needs are unimportant or that he or she is incapable of contributing to a creative solution. To work out the problem together, however, is to discover some of the deepest joys of marriage—true communication, mutual respect and intimate sharing of ourselves.

References

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