

Moving Beyond Deadlock: Breaking Out of Old Marital Conflicts

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Couples often have great expectations when they come in to marriage counseling. Unfortunately, they often want and expect the opposite of what they need for their marriage to survive and to thrive. Spouses characteristically come in to initial sessions eager to tell the therapist the exact nature of their spouse's wrongs, and to enlist the aid of the therapist in "fixing" the errant spouse. Each partner is looking for an ally in making the other person change.

Usually by the time they get to the counselor's office, they have each been identifying the other spouse as "the problem". Through ineffective problem solving and arguing they each come to be convinced that the partner's acceptance of, and adaptation of, his/her solution, is the only way to solve the problem. Each partner is convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no other possible way to conceptualize the problem or the issue. The other partner who is firm in maintaining his/her different perception of the problem is viewed as a liar, crazy, or just plain obstinant.

Each partner gets locked into his/her own perception. They typically find themselves less and less able to put themselves in their partner's shoes and have a great deal of difficulty understanding his/her perspective. Each spouse usually justifies his/her own position while vilifying their partner's position. If the partner feels differently about the same event, then one of the partner's feelings must be "right" the other "wrong". The more they argue and try to problem-solve, the more hopelessly entangled they become in their fixed positions. Each subsequent attempt to break the deadlock, locks them into place even more firmly. As each partner keeps trying to win the other partner over to his/her perception and solution, they each become more and more frustrated. Instead of taking a different tack, they continue the same arguments and tactics more vigorously. Couples may even be aware that emphasis does not produce more clarity or understanding, but instead leads to hurt feelings and more resentment. They feel compelled to continue in the same vein. This circular pattern is self-perpetuating. The good news is that it only takes one party to break out of it. This can occur in much the same way that it only takes one to de-escalate an argument by taking a "time-out".

These circular patterns can be broken by one party shifting his/her own focus away from what the spouse is doing and his/her own justified reactions. The shift to observing himself/herself in the interaction and identifying the part that s/he is playing in this event can change everything. When one partner can stop in the middle of trying to be heard or understood and instead listen enough to "hear" and understand the other, the deadlock can be broken. The act of one partner stopping and acknowledging the other's perception or feelings can let a lot of the tension out of the discussion, and create an environment of dialogue, rather than parallel monologues.

A crucial process that occurs in marriage therapy is where coercive and blaming spouses move from identifying each other as the problem, into accepting full responsibility for

one's own feelings, decisions, and behavior (regardless of what the other spouse is doing). Relationships cannot heal with partners continuing to blame each other and continuing to pursue the other's change as the only solution.

The problem almost never resides in just one party. Each partner brings to the marriage and to the situation his/her own history with unique personal filters and old unresolved issues that distort current interactions and interfere with healthy functioning. For relationships to heal, individuals must be able to look at their own perceptions and their own habitual patterns of dealing with uncomfortable feelings, and begin to understand that the things they believe are most likely not "universal truths", and that ways that they have dealt with feelings are at least part of the problem. When each partner can take responsibility for their own decisions, feelings, and behavior, they can benefit from communication coaching, can restore positive feelings in the relationship, and can begin to solve long-standing relationship problems.

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