

# Avoiding Conflict At All Cost Can Cost You Your Marriage

By Peggy L. Ferguson, Ph.D.

Conflict is not what kills your relationship. How a couple manages conflict largely determines the quality and stability of their marriage. If you come from a family where parental conflict was frequent, loud, and traumatic, you may have always promised yourself that you would never be like that or put up with that in your marriage. Or perhaps, your family represented the other end of the continuum where no one ever discussed feelings, or never negotiated for change, or ever seemed to be in conflict. You knew that the conflict “management” or “resolution” behavior that was modeled in your house was not healthy, but you didn’t really learn how to appropriately deal with conflict.

When you “fell in love” with your beloved, there wasn’t a lot of conflict to deal with. Each person looked at each other through “rose colored” glasses and whatever differences you did notice, you may have found charming or attractive. In the early stage of a relationship, you are flooded with “feel good” neurochemicals, that assist you dismissing “red flags”, potentially problematic differences, and most evidence of any incompatibilities. In the beginning, we tend to think the other person is “just like us.”

As you settle in to the comfort of an ongoing relationship, that emotional enmeshment tends to fade, and the differences between the two of you are no longer invisible, where they were previously hidden by “love blindness”. Partners often complain that their spouse changed when they got married. Usually that is not the case. They were just blind to the characteristics that you are now seeing.

Now that you see your partner’s foibles and weaknesses, you want some things to be different. Maybe your partner’s personal habits in picking up after self, engaging in conversation, thinking before spending money, or trying to flirt with you, are driving you crazy. When you come from a family on an extreme end of a continuum of conflict, you may keep asking yourself, “How important is it?”, or tell yourself that bringing it up or getting into an argument about it, is not worth it. Your expectation is that if you bring up a conflict, it will turn into an argument rather than be resolved. So you stuff your feelings, which day by day are turning into resentments. Perhaps your resentments are being acted out in passive aggressive kinds of ways, where you are punishing your spouse for not recognizing that his/her behavior is driving you crazy and not behaving as if they know that they should be attentive enough to your needs and change--without being asked. It may progress where you avoid all interaction, perceiving many bland comments or observations as criticism. Your relationship develops a cycle of pursue/

withdraw (or “the pac-man dance”), where your partner is trying to re-engage you in the relationship and where you are feeling smothered or criticized. Your communication breaks down which leads to a breakdown in intimacy, and lack of enjoyment of each other’s company (aka - fun).

Perhaps your personality is avoidant, that your self-esteem is poor, that you eschew groups of people, being in the spotlight, or being called upon to let people get close to you. Many people who with low self-esteem feel like an “impostor”, that they are not really the people they are pretending to be, and if found out, that they will be abandoned. Such a fear is quite a disincentive for letting your defenses down, identifying and sharing how you feel about some conflict, disagreement, or misunderstanding.

Regardless of the reasons for conflict avoidance, recoiling from the unavoidable conflicts that come with the territory of being in relationships, can ultimately destroy your marriage. A pattern of conflict avoidance can set the stage for vulnerability to infidelity. The domino effect of avoiding conflict and self-disclosure, broader breakdown in communication, loss of intimacy, and lack of enjoyment in the relationship can bring about the perfect storm for infidelity.

Chronic conflict avoidance and refusal to take personal risks in a relationship where you allow another person to know you, can help establish a cycle of emotional disengagement, expectations that the other person “should” behave differently, blaming the partner for feeling alone and lonely, and identifying incompatibilities as the problem that cannot be solved. In your mind, the partner becomes “the problem” who is getting in the way of your ability to be happy. They are seen as an obstruction to what you want. Another person on the outside of the relationship appears to be easier to talk to. They are seen as less ego threatening than the spouse, who has “seen” your least attractive characteristics despite your efforts to not reveal them. It seems like the solution to get your needs met in a different relationship would be a whole lot easier.

With your spouse, you might have to confront conflicts, identify and reveal uncomfortable feelings, hear things about yourself that you may not want to hear, and yes, you might have to change. In an attempt to avoid conflict, perhaps perceived as a “relationship killer”, conflict avoidance ultimately kills the relationship. Many people who leave their marriages under such circumstances discover later that they have not circumvented the problem, that it is present in the next relationship.

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