

# DISAGREEING WITHOUT FALLING APART

by Karen Holford



THE JOURNAL  
16  
SECOND QUARTER 2011

**When** Benjamin Franklin said that nothing can be certain in this life “except death and taxes,” he forgot the third inevitability—conflict. Whenever two or more people live and work together, they will have differences of opinion and disagreements about innumerable things. It is actually healthy for two people in a close relationship to disagree on a few things! A. P. Herbert, the English humorist, once said that “the idea that people can live closely together, without ever having a serious argument, suggests a lack of spirit that is only to be admired in sheep!”

Well-managed conflicts can actually bring people closer together. It encourages them to listen to each other’s needs, opinions, perspectives, hopes, and feelings. Without conflict, couples may not be motivated to deepen their relationship by enriching their understanding of one another.

But most of us don’t like conflict. We avoid it. We’d rather put up with frustration, hurt, self-denial, or depression than work through an area of disagreement with another person, even our spouse.

Let’s look at some healthy ways to handle the conflicts and differences in marriage.

## IDENTIFY THE EMOTION THAT’S FUELING THE ANGER

When we’re angry, it’s usually because a feeling has overwhelmed us

WELL-MANAGED CONFLICTS CAN ACTUALLY BRING PEOPLE CLOSER TOGETHER.

and we’re finding it hard to deal with that emotion. Think about the last time you felt angry. Which emotion sparked your anger? Perhaps it was fear, frustration, disappointment, em-

barrassment, being overloaded, feeling misunderstood, sadness, or just being tired. When we can identify these emotions, we can begin to address the real feelings behind our anger.

It’s also helpful to consider the emotion that’s fuelling your husband’s anger during an argument. Try relating to him as someone who is afraid, sad, disappointed, frustrated, etc., rather than as someone who is angry.

## IDENTIFY YOUR CONFLICT PATTERN (EPH. 4:26)

If you and your husband have regular arguments, try to notice when they happen, how they start, and what they’re about. For example, if you tend to argue when you’re both tired or in the car, perhaps you can plan to talk about difficult topics at some other time, do a relaxing activity when you’re tired, or listen to something uplifting when you travel. If your arguments are mostly about in-laws or finances, you may want to wait till you’re both feeling refreshed and relaxed, and then sit down together and have a deeper discussion about the issue.

IT’S ALSO IMPORTANT TO TREAT CONFLICTS LIKE DIRTY DISHES.

It's also important to treat conflicts like dirty dishes—it's best to clean them as soon as they've been used (definitely the same day), or they'll be much nastier to deal with later!

Jake and Louisa promised to have all their challenging discussions sitting at the table while holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. They found it helpful to see each other's emotions and to be holding each other gently. These simple actions created an unspoken promise to stick with the discussion and stay committed to each other.

### ASSESS YOUR CONFLICT SKILLS

Ask yourself what happens when you manage a disagreement well. If you have conflicts at work or with friends, maybe you cope better with those conflicts than with conflicts at home. What are you doing and saying in these situations away from home that you aren't saying when you're with family? Do you treat the other person differently when conflicts are more peaceful and respectful? If you manage these other disagreements better than you manage arguments with your spouse, what can you learn that can help you to disagree more respectfully at home?

### LISTEN WELL (JAMES 1:19)

When I talk with couples who struggle with verbal fighting, I give each person a large sheet of paper and ask them to focus on one specific conflict issue. Each spouse writes the issue in one sentence in the middle of their sheet of paper. Then they draw a circle around their sentence and five lines radiating out from the central shape to the edge of the paper. In each of the five sections, they write one of the following sentence starters:

- This issue is important to me because...
- My biggest fear, concern, or worry about this issue is...
- Some possible positive outcomes for this issue might be...
- In my family, we dealt with similar issues by...
- A significant experience I have had with this issue in the past is...

From his or her own perspective, each spouse fills out the sections with as much useful information as possible. Then I ask them to swap their sheets of paper and read what the other person has written. This simple activity helps couples begin to listen to each other and understand each other without

WHAT DO WE GAIN IF WE WIN ALL THE ARGUMENTS BUT LOSE OUR RELATIONSHIPS?

getting into the familiar arguments that tend to spiral out of control.

### SHARE THE PROBLEM (MATT. 19:5-6)

In a marriage, every problem is a shared problem. When you're "one flesh," anything that affects one of you affects both of you. It isn't helpful for me to think that something is my husband's problem and that he needs to sort it out alone, or that something is my problem for me to sort out by myself. When a problem affects both of us and our relationship, we can share the responsibility for working on it. This is a wise and cooperative approach that can bring us closer together, rather than resorting to blame and fault-finding that pushes us further apart. We both need to think about what we can do differently to improve the situation.

### MAKING A REQUEST INSTEAD OF A COMPLAINT (ROM. 12:16)

Whenever we nag and complain, we're being negative and critical of each other. Nagging and complaining may cause our spouses to defend themselves, which just adds fuel to the fire of an argument.

Instead of nagging or complaining, try making a simple request: "Will you please take out the garbage today?" Or try a specific, nonjudgmental statement based around the following structure:

- In this specific situation...
- When this specific thing happens...
- I feel this emotion... because I want or need...
- And it would really help me if you would do...

And, if relevant...

- Because then I would be able to help you by doing...

For example:

- When you come home late for dinner
- Without letting me know you're going to be late
- I feel frustrated because I want your dinner to be fresh, and because I need to know how to plan my time in the evening.
- It would really help me if you would let me know when you're going to be late
- Because then I could make sure your meal is nice and hot, and I can also make better use of my time.

**FIGHT FOR YOUR RELATIONSHIP** (ROM. 12:18, 19)

Fighting for our relationship means finding respectful ways to discuss our differences. Fighting fairly means avoiding dangerous ways of arguing that hurt each other verbally, emotionally, spiritually, or physically, such as:

- Generalizing (“You always..” or “You never..”), which invites the other person to look for exceptions in his or her behavior, to become defensive, and to generalize about you, too
- Exaggerating or making something seem worse than it is to add weight to your side of the argument
- Blaming the other person
- Yelling at the other person
- Being violent or threatening violence
- Criticizing the other person or his/her family members
- Saying cruel things
- Digging up past offenses and problems
- Walking away from the argument before it has been resolved

**AIM FOR WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS** (MATT. 5:9; ROM. 12:18)

What do we gain if we win all the arguments but lose our relationships? When one person wins, the other person can feel belittled, resentful, bitter, sad, rejected, misunderstood, unheard, and alone. In time these feelings can crack a Grand Canyon through a relationship. It’s more loving to look for cooperative solutions where you both feel good about yourselves and each other.

**STOP ARGUMENTS BEFORE THEY HAPPEN**

Couples argue most frequently about finances, in-laws, how to discipline their children, sexual intimacy, and household chores. If you can find ways to talk about these potentially challenging areas before they become major conflicts, you can minimize your arguments.

Couples often avoid these difficult topics until they become so big that they’re overwhelming. Finding safe ways to talk regularly about what is going well in these areas—and discussing some of the minor challenges you’re facing—will mean that you may be able to extinguish the fire of an argument before it burns out of control.

**INVITE YOUR SPOUSE TO HELP YOU** (GAL. 6:2)

Early in our marriage, another ministry couple taught us the phrase that saved their marriage: “I have a problem I think you can help me with...”

This phrase has helped us, too! Whenever I was

COUPLES OFTEN  
AVOID THESE  
DIFFICULT TOPICS  
UNTIL THEY  
BECOME SO BIG  
THAT THEY’RE  
OVERWHELMING.

troubled by Bernie’s responses or behaviors, I would stop and ask myself why it bothered me so much. He was quite happy doing it his way, and I realized that the problem was usually my selfish attitude toward his behavior. So I would try to reshape my re-

sponse to him by admitting I had a problem and inviting him to help me. I might say, “Bernie, I have a problem I think you can help me with. When I need to do the laundry in a hurry, it slows me down when your clothes are inside out. So I was wondering if you could help me by making sure your socks and shirts are right side out when you put them in the laundry bag.”

Using this sentence starter always makes us laugh, and humor can be a helpful way to pour oil on the stormy waters of a difficult conversation. We like being asked to help each other—it makes us feel useful and capable, and it’s much easier for us to respond positively to this kind of suggestion.

**SOOTHE EACH OTHER** (PROV. 15:1; 1 COR. 4:4-8)

Discover how you can soothe each other with your words, humor, warmth, generous responses, comfort, and understanding. Couples who learn how to soothe each other’s ruffled feathers can help to heal their relationship after challenging conflicts.

**OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRACE AND GROWTH**

Every conflict in our marriage is an opportunity to show our deep and mature love. We can look at each other through God’s loving eyes and show each other God’s love and grace as we manage our differences. When we learn how to be patient, unselfish, thoughtful, forgiving, and understanding, we mature in our spiritual lives and in our ability to love each other in the way that God loves us. 



**KAREN HOLFORD** is a freelance writer and family therapist living in Auchtermuchty, Scotland. Her husband, Bernie Holford, is the president of the Scottish Mission. They attended three marriage retreats in the first three months of marriage and thought they would never need to know all the stuff they were being taught about conflict, but over the past 27 years, they’ve had plenty of opportunities to practice what they learned—and they’re still learning!