



# *Healing Conflicts From the Inside Out*

“WHAT JUST HAPPENED THERE?” I was bewildered and confused. A conversation that started with “Dinner’s ready, Darling!” had thrown us into a verbally vicious battlefield. And it was all about potatoes!

Bernie had bought a bargain sack of potatoes. But they were beginning to sprout, and I was trying to use them up quickly. They had been the basis of nearly every meal for three days. I was fed up with scrubbing and preparing them, and Bernie was fed up with eating them. So the innocent potatoes became a recipe for disaster.

We moved furiously from fighting about the potatoes to fighting about money, blaming each other’s family, adding extra fuel from a fight we had three years ago, and turning a minor conflict into a total catastrophe. A bowl of potato soup had ripped open our hearts and exposed our frustrations, our fears, and our insecurities.

Most couples have disagreements. That’s normal. We grow closer through our conflicts when they help us to understand each other’s feelings, needs, hopes, and hurts. Conflicts become opportunities to understand each other better when we learn how to discuss our differences in loving and respectful ways.

## *Innocent potatoes became a recipe for disaster.*

### **PANIC PATTERNS**

Dr. Sue Johnson is a couples therapist who has studied arguing couples for many years. Eventually she found some patterns in their behavior and language, which has enabled her to help many couples all over the world.

Dr. Johnson noticed that when one or both partners feel unsafe, they are more likely to panic and escalate a relatively simple discussion into a catastrophic conflict. Search for the video “Still Face Experiment” on YouTube and watch what happens when a baby experiences a similar kind of attachment panic. You can read about these patterns in the excellent book that Dr. Johnson wrote with Kenneth Sandefer, *Created for Connection*.<sup>1</sup>

### **THE REALLY BIG QUESTIONS**

Dr. Johnson noticed that underneath couples’ panic patterns were several deep and basic questions about the relationship:

- Do you really love me and care about me?
- Can you empathize with my feelings?
- Do you care about my struggles, and are you willing to help me?
- Can I depend on you? Will you always be there for me?

God knows we have these BIG questions, and He sets us a powerful example by answering them before we even ask them:

- I love you and care about you (Jeremiah 31:3).
- I am compassionate toward your feelings (Psalm 103:8, 13, 14).
- I am always available to help you (Isaiah 41:10).
- I will always be with you (Joshua 1:9).

### **DEBRIEFING THE POTATOES**

When we debriefed our potato episode we realized that some of these BIG questions were fueling our reactions to each other.

When I was upset about the potatoes, I was really asking questions like these: Do you care about me? Do you know how much of my time and effort it takes to scrub and prepare the potatoes? Do you care that I feel alone and unsupported in the kitchen? Do you care that making all these potato dishes takes extra time when I’m already busy? Do you care that I have taken an hour to make you a meal? Do you appreciate what I’m doing for you? Do you appreciate how much effort I’m exerting to save money in every area of our life?

When Bernie was upset about the potatoes he was asking similar questions. Do you appreciate how hard I’m working to provide for us? Do you appreciate my efforts to manage our budget by buying good-value potatoes?

### **UNDERSTANDING POWERFUL EMOTIONS**

We used to argue, make up, and then forget about our disagreements. Now we take time to reflect on them together and to see what we can learn from them. Whenever one of us feels very strongly about something in a way that seems disproportionate to the current situation, we start wondering, “When have I been in a similar situation?” or “When have I felt like this before?” We usually trace these powerful emotions back to something that happened when we were children, or a time when we felt very vulnerable. For example, I noticed that some everyday conversations would leave me feeling unsafe and distressed. We looked for the pattern and discovered that I had a highly sensitive “shame radar.” If I detected the slightest hint that I was being shamed, laughed at, or put down, it would trigger my defense shield, and I would be more likely to overreact to the current situation.

## Healing Conflicts From the Inside Out

*Oh, love  
me—and  
right now!—  
Hold me  
tight!  
Just the  
way you  
promised.  
Now comfort  
me so I can  
live, really  
live.*

Psalm 119:76, 77,  
Message

I wondered where this strong shame reaction came from. Then I remembered that my first-grade teacher humiliated me in front of the whole class almost every week. I began to tell Bernie about those painful stories. He listened to me, comforted me, and began to understand why and where I hurt. I learned to recognize that these strong emotions were connected with the stories from my past, and then it was easier to recalibrate my emotional response to the here and now.

### ANSWERING THE BIG QUESTIONS

Arguments are much less likely to happen when a couple feels close and secure. These simple things will help reduce conflicts and negative interactions:

- Be kind to each other every day. This is one of the most powerful ways to nurture a relationship (Ephesians 4:32).

- Show or declare your love in different and creative ways at least once a day (1 John 4:7-19).
- Be specifically thankful and appreciative at least once a day (1 Thessalonians 5:18).
- Ask about each other's high and low points in the day. Celebrate the good points and comfort the low points: "I am so sorry that you had to go through that. It must have been so sad/difficult/frustrating/lonely, etc." (Romans 12:15).
- It's surprising how often the sense of being alone and unsupported fuels many conflicts between couples. Offer to help each other at least five minutes a day (Galatians 6:2).
- Affirm your husband or wife regularly and talk about your commitment to each other (Matthew 19:6). 1

<sup>1</sup> Sue Johnson and Kenneth Sanderfer, *Created for Connection* (New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company), 2016.

*Karen Holford is a family therapist and director of the Family Ministries Department for the Trans-European Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.*

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POWERFUL  
STORY TO  
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