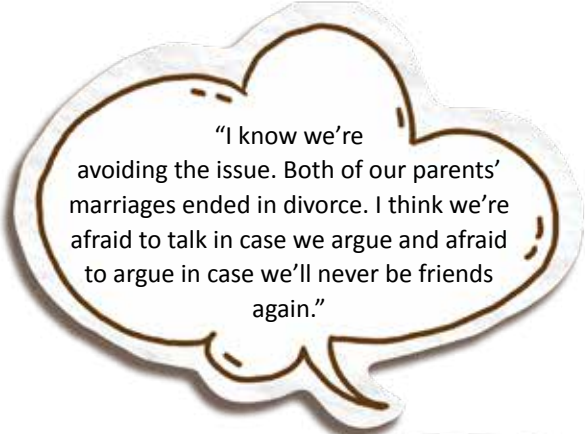
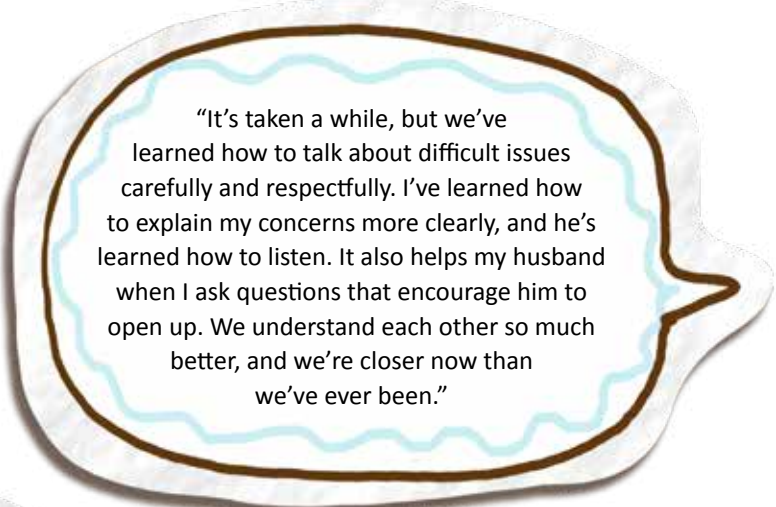



# Talking Grows Togetherness



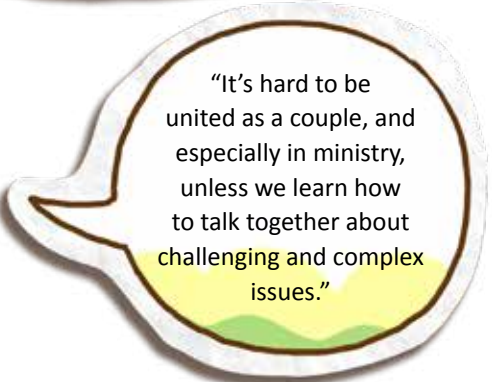
"I know we're avoiding the issue. Both of our parents' marriages ended in divorce. I think we're afraid to talk in case we argue and afraid to argue in case we'll never be friends again."



"It's taken a while, but we've learned how to talk about difficult issues carefully and respectfully. I've learned how to explain my concerns more clearly, and he's learned how to listen. It also helps my husband when I ask questions that encourage him to open up. We understand each other so much better, and we're closer now than we've ever been."



"Almost every time we talk about this, we fight. So we've stopped talking, but now I feel angry instead."



"It's hard to be united as a couple, and especially in ministry, unless we learn how to talk together about challenging and complex issues."

## WHY IS IT SO HARD TO TALK?

Dozens of factors make it hard to talk about the things that matter to us. Sometimes we can't find the right words.

Perhaps our past experiences prevent us from talking openly. Maybe we're afraid that talking will make matters worse or that we'll say the wrong thing. Maybe it's hard to talk because our powerful emotions obscure what we really want to say, or we're afraid that we'll be misunderstood. Maybe we never saw people having deep and constructive conversations about their differences, so we have no idea how to talk about the difficult stuff. Or maybe it's just hard to find the space to talk because our lives are so busy.

## **GOD CARES**

When you need to talk about something difficult together, pray that God will help you to understand the other person, to feel His love for them, and to find the best words to share your thoughts with them (Prov. 25:11; James 1:5, 19). Take time to sit quietly with God and listen to the helpful thoughts and wisdom He brings to your mind. Then explore a few of the following ideas.

## **NOT SURE WHERE TO START**

When something is bothering you, and you're not sure how to talk about it, try this: Pull out a sheet of paper and pen. Draw a small oval in the middle of the page. Inside the oval write a rough sentence describing what you think you're most concerned about. Then divide the paper into six sections radiating out from the oval. In each section write one of the following sentence starters:

- The effect this concern is having on me right now is . . .
- The feelings I have in relation to this issue are . . . (I feel angry because . . . I feel sad because . . . I feel frustrated because . . . I feel disappointed because . . . I feel afraid because . . . I feel anxious because . . .)
- My past experiences, which may be coloring how I'm feeling about this concern today, are . . .
- On a scale of 0-10, where 0 means that I am not at all concerned and where 10 means that I am extremely concerned, I would rate this current issue at . . .
- My hopes for talking about this issue together are . . .
- The best possible outcome for me is . . . Other possible options are . . .

Writing things down in this structured way will help you to sort out your thoughts and feelings so you can talk about them more confidently. Keep the sheet of paper in front of you during the conversation so you don't forget any important



information. Or rewrite what you want to say, once you've captured all your ideas, and give it to your husband or wife to read.

Try having both partners fill out these sheets. Writing can be simpler than talking because it helps prevent us from getting stuck in unhelpful patterns of conversation. Swap your sheets and read them carefully with prayerful hearts. Write any questions on sticky notes, attach them to the paper, and pass the sheet back to your partner for more explanation if needed.

### KEEP IT SIMPLE

Or think about your conversation this way:

- What's the most important thing I need my partner to understand? How can I say this in the simplest and clearest way?
- Why do I want to say it? What do I hope will be different once I've talked about this?
- What effect might this conversation have on my partner? What might they think and feel about what I have to say? How can I say what I need to say in a way that my partner will find easiest to receive and understand?
- When would be a good time to talk? Plan your deeper conversations for a time when you both have the space and energy to talk and listen. It's difficult to focus on

important conversations when you're tired, hungry, stressed, or distracted.

- One useful framework for explanation: "When this happens . . . in this specific context . . . I feel . . . , and it would really help me if you could . . . , and then I could help you by . . ."

### ARE YOU REALLY LISTENING?

Many important conversations break down because one or both people aren't listening with their full attention. Take notes to remind yourself of what your partner is saying, or draw a mind-map if you prefer. Or pause after a few sentences and let your partner sum up what they've heard you say. Then both of you can check that you've been clearly understood.

### GROUND RULES

Some couples create ground rules to help them talk about difficult issues. Here are some of their tips:

- Listen to each other speak for five minutes on the topic without interrupting or commenting. Then sum up the speaker's key points.



*If one of you gets distressed or angry during the conversation, take a break for a while.*

- Maintain eye contact or physical contact while your partner is speaking.
- Give yourselves space to reflect on what's been said before expecting a response. "OK, this is a very important matter. I'd like to give it some serious thought. Please can we talk about it for an hour after dinner?"
- Make appointments to talk about important things so that you both keep the time free.
- If one of you gets distressed or angry during the conversation, take a break for a while. It's almost impossible to think and talk rationally when your emotions are running high.
- Check that you're speaking the same "language." It doesn't help if one of you is discussing the topic at a deeply emotional level and the other is discussing it in a rational way. Strong

emotions need empathy and soothing *before* the brain is ready to talk at a more rational level.

- Don't try to problem-solve until you fully understand what your partner thinks and feels about an issue.
- One reason that challenging conversations can be difficult is that we haven't seen other adults talk about their differences in a respectful and useful way. Try having some well-managed conversations when your older children are around. This will help them learn how to talk about their own complex issues.
- Don't give up on having challenging conversations about your differences. The more you talk, the easier it will probably become. The more you welcome and accept your partner's thoughts and feelings, the more confidence they'll have to talk about the things that bother them. J

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*Karen Holford is a family therapist who helps families talk about difficult issues in Edinburgh, Scotland.*

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and Shine,  
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