

Navigating the Rapids of Marital Conflict

Or how to keep your love boat sailing smoothly when you hit whitewater.

By Rob Gaskill



Just about every newly married couple experiences the jolt of marital conflict, usually very early in their marriage. If you have ever gone whitewater rafting you know the shock of that first bump even though you knew it was coming. It is the same for your marriage. Sure you've been through marriage preparation and everybody has told you that you'll experience conflict sometime, but it never fails to shake us up.

Speaking personally, I think I equated arguments to marital failure. If we fought about so many things how could we really love each other?

If you find yourself in this predicament do not think that you are doomed to divorce. Many of us have ridden these rapids and lived to tell about it.

Looking back over a quarter of a century of marriage, I can say you will survive, your relationship can be stronger, and you can develop skills for navigating the conflict in your marriage.

If you have been married for at least a year, you have probably fallen out of the love boat a few times into the icy waters of a good spousal brawl or two. Have you noticed that you tend to

fight about the same things over and over again?

After twenty-five years of marriage I can tell you the number one thing I do that is guaranteed to get me tossed out of the love boat quicker than I can say, "Oops, I forgot." *If I hang my coat on the coat tree reserved for guests my wife goes ballistic.*

Sound silly? It does to me. How many times have I argued that we aren't expecting guests or there is no room where the kids hang their coats or it was only for a few minutes or who cares? Leaving the coat tree open for guests is one of my wife's preferences and my ignoring it is the equivalent to a slap in the face to her. Moreover, preferences like this one are one of the seven deadly issues

that trigger almost all marital conflict.

The seven deadly issues that trigger almost all conflict

Just about any conflict you'll ever experience in your marriage will be tied to one of these seven deadly issues. Think about the flashpoints in your relationship. I bet they can be reduced to one of these common denominators!

Conflict Triggers: money, sex, chores, children, preferences, in-laws, and time.

You may call your triggers by different names but read the descriptions below and see if you can find your conflict sparks in these definitions. Realizing that you always fight



about the same things is the first step toward changing your behavior. The second step is to ask yourself why you fight about these things. If you want to avoid conflict in the future, change your behavior or focus on resolving these issues. It could be as simple as not hanging your coat where your wife doesn't want you to hang it!

Sex This is an emotional issue and many spouses are afraid of getting hurt or rejected by their partners so they avoid discussing their feelings about sexual issues. We all bring different perspectives about sex to marriage. When our perspectives don't align there is friction. When these differences don't get worked out, they become a trigger for conflict.

Money No matter how much money a couple has, it is often the biggest source of marital conflict. Money includes income, or lack of it; saving patterns, investing styles, spending habits, and contributions to charity. It's important for spouses to discuss their values and feelings about money so each partner can try to understand the other.

What patterns of managing and discussing finances did your parents follow? This can be very telling and a good prediction for your own behavior.



Working out a budget and planning finances usually require negotiation and compromise, but they are important tasks that help couples set priorities and goals for the future. Be aware of the spending and saving habits each of you brings to the marriage. How are they similar or different? This can be crucial, especially during the first years when money is often tight.

Chores This refers to the division of labor in the household. Again, spouses usually bring different perceptions to the marriage.

Division of labor is a great concept for efficiency. Too often it is interpreted in a marriage this way: I'll earn the money and you take care of the home

and the kids. This line of thinking is a sure-fire formula for disaster.

Whether one of you is a stay-at-home parent or a fellow breadwinner, you and your spouse are partners. A partnership is defined as a relationship resembling a legal partnership and usually involving close cooperation between parties having specified and joint rights and responsibilities.

It is likely that our culture is responsible for our wrong perceptions about each spouse's duties in a marriage. Think of the TV shows you may have grown up watching. Were those shows real life or make believe? You know the answer. Real marriages are made by real people! Successful marriages are counter-cultural.

Children or Childrearing

This is a time-consuming task that requires huge amounts of energy. Husbands and wives often have conflicting views on how to parent, based on how they were raised. Whatever decisions and rules parents make, it's important that they are united in front of the children. Otherwise, kids will learn to play one parent off the other, which contributes to further conflict in the marriage.

Preferences This means the individual preferences each spouse brings to the marriage.





reason—it's true. Be careful criticizing your spouse's family even if your spouse does. They have an unspoken right to do this and you do not.

Time This refers to how each spouse spends their time. He may feel Saturdays are for half-day golf dates while she may like him to accompany her to the mall. He may plan to spend the day playing basketball or softball with his buddies while she plans a long list of "honey dos" that require his full attention.

Time can also refer to the degree to which

This can include manners, social skills, degrees of cleanliness or tidiness, work ethic and many more. You may not think whether you squeeze the toothpaste tube from the bottom or the middle matters much when you are dating. But once the honeymoon is over, this can become a volatile flashpoint. Remember my coat rack example!

you each honor time spent together. If you were used to spending twelve hour days climbing the corporate ladder before the big day, you may find that this does not sit well with a spouse who expects to sit down to a peaceful dinner at a regular time every evening.

Barricades to conflict resolution—attitude and communication skills

The attitude we bring to conflict resolution and our personal

communication skills can have the effect of throwing water or gasoline on the embers of marital conflict.

The biggest roadblock to conflict resolution can be your attitude. It is a given that you will experience conflict in your marriage. If you accept this truth with the attitude that despite the conflict you cherish your relationship more than you cherish winning the argument, then there is much hope for you!

Effective conflict resolution comes from an attitude of Christ-like humility. In his letter to the Philippians, St. Paul says: *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves"* (Phil 2:3). Take it from me, this is easier said than done! Your attitude is a reflection of the worth you place on your spouse and your relationship. After almost two and a half decades of marriage my attitude is this: we will disagree about a variety of things as long as we live, but our relationship is far more important than our disagreement. And I treasure my wife far more than I care about winning an argument.

Inlaws These are usually most problematic in the early years of a marriage. Inlaw issues can trigger conflict within the entire family. Spouses can deal with inlaw problems by sharing their feelings and discussing what kind of relationship they want with their in-laws.

Expressing negativity about in-laws usually just makes things worse. The old saying "blood is thicker than water" has been around for ages for one sure



Another roadblock to resolving conflict is a lack of communication skills. Many people are unable to express their own thoughts and feelings without causing anger and hurt feelings. They mean no offense; they just don't know how to get their point across clearly and respectfully

Think about your parents' marriage. How did they argue? How did they resolve their differences? Chances are you have inherited their conflict resolution skill or lack of it.

Are you the type who prefers to boldly confront your differences and get them out in the open?





What happens if your spouse's style is to avoid conflict?

Speaking personally again, I know my wife and I have each had to modify our communication skills over the years in order to move forward. It is easy to confuse a spouse's different communication style with affection or lack of it. I know I had to learn to accept constructive criticism from my wife as a good thing. My love language is words of affirmation and constructive criticism isn't always affirming.

Three ways to help you effectively navigate conflict resolution

Here are three techniques that can help you effectively navigate everyday relationships. They are timing, trust, and transparency.

Timing The old saying, "timing

is everything," is especially true in conflict resolution. If you need to talk with your spouse about an important issue, don't say the first thing that comes to your mind when either one of you is angry, tired, or upset. If necessary, say, "I need a little time," and specify a time that you'll agree to come together to calmly discuss your conflict with a goal of resolution, not revenge.

This isn't brain surgery. As a child you knew not to ask for that toy you have been wanting if a less-than-stellar report card was in the mailbox.

Trust Or a lack of it—will profoundly affect your ability to resolve conflict in your marriage. For effective resolution to take place, both people need to trust that the other one genuinely cares about the relationship and is willing to work at finding a resolution.

If you continually behave in a way that antagonizes your spouse (like hanging your coat in the wrong place), then she will doubt your sincere desire to resolve conflict.

Transparency When resolving

conflicts, it can also be risky to be transparent, but real communication can only take place if genuine feelings and honest thoughts are expressed. We're often reluctant to express feelings of hurt, resentment, fear, or insecurity because we know it makes us vulnerable.

Most of us don't come into our marriages with expertise in these three techniques. They must be understood and attempted again and again so they can be perfected.

Because marriage is a union of two individuals who have unique viewpoints, past experiences, frames of reference and values, conflict is inevitable. No two people can agree on everything all the time. However, there are certain strategies and guidelines that relate to conflict resolution specifically.

Conflict Resolution Do's and Don'ts

- Don't cover conflict with the silent treatment, pouting, or by acting out your emotions.
- Do keep your resentments fresh so you can honestly express yourself.
- Do be willing to take responsibility for your mistakes. This sends a message that resolution is more important than being right.
- Do give each other permission to call a "time out" when timing is bad.
- Do speak the truth, honestly and in love.

Seven Steps to Resolving Conflict

So far we have discussed the inevitability of conflict, identified the common causes of fights, explored barricades resolution, attitudes for effective results, as well as do's and don'ts. Finally we are ready to examine steps to resolving conflict.

Like athletic skills, these need to be developed through practice. They work best in the environment created by timing, truth and transparency. These



steps are recommended for those issues that are considered, by one or both individuals, to be highly important, especially those that seem to surface on a regular basis and are rooted in the seven deadly issues that trigger most conflict.

1. Identify and define the source of your conflict. Get to the root of the problem, name it, and clearly define it without using condemning, hurtful language. Example: We need to find a way to share responsibility for our finances so we both can be better informed and share the weight of responsibility.

2. Agree to work through the conflict until the conflict is resolved. Closely tied to timing, agree to set aside sufficient time to talk about the issues and pursue a workable solution.

3. Share and explore each other's feelings about the issues driving the conflict. All too often couples talk around their feelings or act them out instead of openly and honestly expressing them. When a person believes they've been heard and understood they won't feel the need to continue explaining their point and will be ready to move forward in the process.

4. Identify the "win." Many people find it easy to complain about what they don't want, but find it a challenge to clearly identify what they do want. Take out a piece of paper and write out the win or wins for either spouse as a result of the conflict resolution.

5. Create options and multiple solutions. After you both clearly understand the conflict and the other spouse's perspective and feelings, start listing possible solutions on your paper.

6. Choose actions you both are committed to follow through. Both of you must commit to following through with some sort of action related to the agreed-upon resolution. If you drop the ball, you lose credibility and make it harder to resolve the

conflict next time.

7. After time, evaluate the outcome and make modifying changes if necessary. After you both have had time to follow through with the actions you agreed to take, evaluate your thoughts and feelings to decide whether or not the solution is effective.

Forgiveness—the critical component

Even if your marriage has suffered from years of unhealthy conflict, you can still create a better future by applying these principles now. We all know we can't change the past, but we can start fresh for the future. You both need to begin by taking responsibility for your part in the conflicts that brought you to this place. When you both value your relationship above all else then you both need to be willing to say, "I was wrong, and I'm sorry. I know I hurt you and I don't want to hurt you again. Please forgive me."

At the same time, we too must forgive. In St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:31-32) we read:

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

When you make a decision to forgive, you are free to begin a more healthy method of resolving conflict.

Will this whitewater ever end?

The answer is yes and no. Yes, raging rapids often empty into a tranquil lake. But I would be less than honest if I told you that following these principals would totally eliminate conflict in your marriage.

A wise priest once told me that any time you get two sinners living in close proximity there will be sparks.

Isn't the goal of whitewater rafting to face the challenge without falling out of the boat? These are navigational tools. Just as practice enables rafting enthusiasts to take on more challenging rides, practice with these tools can help you grow closer even through the everyday bumps.

Marriage was the first institution God created and he created it so that we could grow through it. Conflict in your marriage is inevitable and it serves an important purpose when managed properly.

Rob Gaskill, husband of Mary and father of ten, works for Christianity Today International as Director of Sales and Strategic Alliances.



Lifelong Marriage Workshop Series

Conflict

Navigating the Rapids of Marital Conflict or how to keep your love boat sailing smoothly when you hit whitewater By Rob Gaskill

Guide

All marriages involve conflict. Couples that stay together have the same amount of disagreements as couples that divorce, yet they are able to work through the disagreements. Rob Gaskill's article covers the seven deadly issues that trigger almost all conflict: money, sex, chores, children, preferences, inlaws, and time, using examples and advice from his personal experience of being married 25 years as well as information from top marriage experts and quotes from Scripture.

Reflection Questions are provided for each spouse to fill out separately. It is recommended that they read the article, and then take ten minutes to answer the questions, honestly, openly, and individually. They may also like to fill out the **Navigating Conflict** inventory, which helps the couple figure out how they are doing in different areas of the relationship. They also fill this out separately and come together to discuss it. If you are facilitating a group, give the couples time to fill out and discuss these on their own, and then ask for general group discussion. Remind the group that they do not have to share specific personal details, just general information to get the discussion going.

Further resources, internet and books, are listed on the **Resources** page. The last page, **Reminders**, has quotations and prayers that the couple can reflect upon, and print out on a heavy stock paper, cut out and use for inspiration and guidance as well as to remind them to think about their marriage. They can be posted on a bulletin board or refrigerator, or used as bookmarks.

For more downloadables in the Lifelong Marriage Workshop Series, please visit www.familyministries.org. Ideas and questions can be emailed to cceditor@archchicago.org.

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Reflection Questions

1. What is a conflict trigger in my marriage? Is there more than one?

2. The trigger I will work on is _____.

List the “wins” for my spouse and me when we resolve this conflict.

3. How can I use timing, trust, and transparency in resolving this conflict?

4. I resolve to _____.



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Navigating Conflict

We marry someone who has both qualities and personality characteristics we like and admire and others that present us with challenges. As a result, adjustments, negotiations and compromises all occur as a couple begins their married life together.

Below are several categories of the typical tasks of early marriage. It is not unusual for newly married couples to be doing well in some areas while other areas need further discussion and negotiation.

Directions: On the line next to each task, place the number that indicates how well you believe the two of you are doing at this point in your marriage. Once you have filled in all the lines, discuss this with your spouse

1=Doing great 2=Doing okay 3=Needs more work

Adjusting to different likes/dislikes, preferences, habits:

- _____ Sleep
- _____ Holidays and traditions
- _____ Food and eating habits
- _____ Cleaning, laundry
- _____ Refrigerator use
- _____ Television and computer use
- _____ Pets
- _____ Appearance
- _____ Affectionate expression

- _____ Cars, maintenance
- _____ Punctuality
- _____ Shopping
- _____ Saving, recycling, disposing of things
- _____ Temperature settings
- _____ Standards of neatness or cleanliness
- _____ Bathroom use, showering time
- _____ Etiquette
- _____ Sexual desire and expression

Shifting from "me" to "we":

- _____ Money
- _____ Friends
- _____ Recreation
- _____ Career
- _____ Decision-making
- _____ Vacations
- _____ Religion
- _____ Appearance
- _____ Food and eating
- _____ Politics

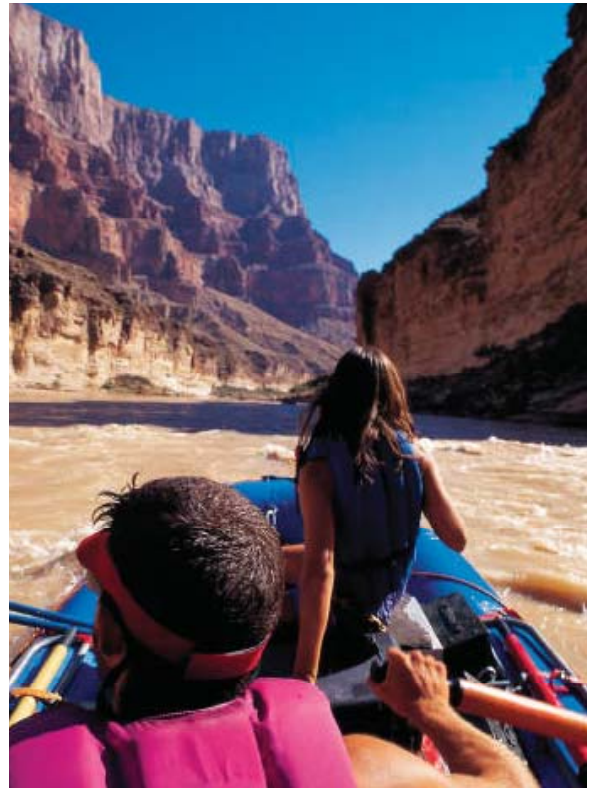
Renegotiating relationships with family members and in-laws:

- _____ Spousal relationship priority
- _____ Extended family involvement
- _____ Setting boundaries, geographical and privacy
- _____ Identity shift from child to spouse
- _____ Communication, consultation, decision-making
- _____ Holidays, vacations

Deciding role assignment and division of household tasks:

- _____ Shopping
- _____ Insurance
- _____ Car maintenance
- _____ Yard work
- _____ House work
- _____ Trash
- _____ Gift buying
- _____ Repairs
- _____ Bill paying
- _____ Social activities
- _____ Establishing and furnishing house or apartment.
- _____ Juggling education, career, and family life.
- _____ Family planning decisions.
- _____ Managing disillusion as we become aware of the imperfections and peculiarities of mate and marriage.

Other:



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Other:



Resources

Websites

www.FamilyMinistries.org: Family Ministries Office of the Archdiocese of Chicago. Subscribe to First Years and Forever, the monthly e-newsletter for newly married.

www.ForYourMarriage.org: Marriage strengthening website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

www.SmartMarriages.com: Coalition to promote healthy marriages and marriage education and resources.

Books

Ten Great Dates to Energize Your Marriage by David and Claudia Arp, Zondervan.

You Don't Have to Take It Any More by Dr. Steven Stosny, Free Press.

How to Improve Your Marriage Without Talking About It by Drs. Patricia Love and Steven Stosny, Random House.

Why Marriages Succeed or Fail, and How You Can Make Yours Last by John Gottman, Ph.D., Simon and Schuster.

A Lasting Promise: A Christian Guide to Fighting for Your Marriage by Scott Stanley, Daniel Trathen, Savanna McCain, and Milt Bryan, Jossey-Bass.

A Young Couple's Blueprint for Managing Money by Bonnie Baron Scully, CFP. The Scully Files. Order at www.FamilyMinistries.org.

The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate by Gary Chapman, Northfield Publishing.

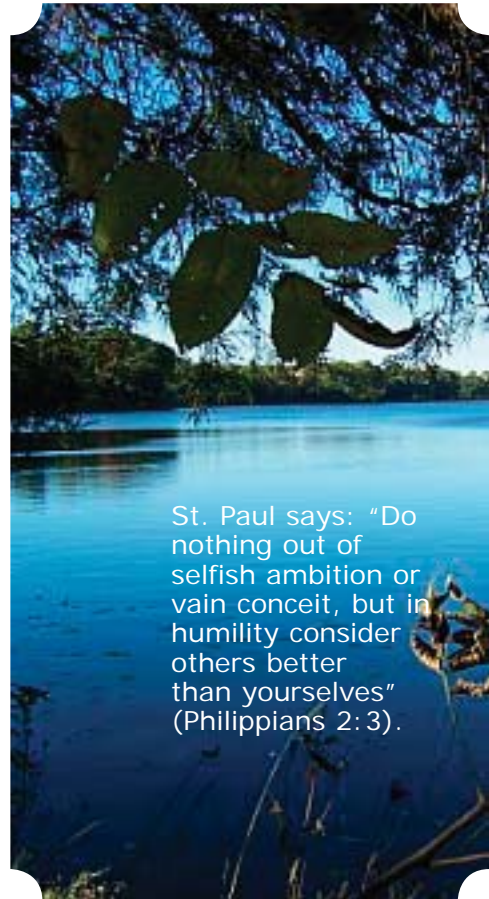
Getting it Right the First Time, Creating a Healthy Marriage by Barry and Emily McCarthy, Routledge.



Use these reminders as book marks or post on your bulletin board or refrigerator.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians (4:31-32)



Prayer of a Married Couple

Lord, you showed your support of marriage by performing your first miracle at the Wedding Feast of Cana. Help us work together as a couple so that we may grow in love together, serving each other and you. Strengthen us, O Lord, against hardening our hearts and help us to truly repent and ask forgiveness of each other, and you, when it is needed. We ask this in your name. Amen.

