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What Couples Really Fight About

Jeffrey Santee, Ph.D.

“HE IS CLUELESS! HE SHOULD know I hate it when he acts that way.” “She turns all cold on me. Besides, she thinks I’m a mind reader.” “He cares more about his stupid football than he does me!” “She hasn’t wanted to have sex in weeks. I didn’t sign up to be a monk!”

In my work with couples I commonly hear such painful exclamations from people who are struggling to make their love work. Many come to therapy after years of fighting about the same old things but never resolving anything, hoping that I can provide some sage advice to serve as “magic dust” that turns their partner into the love of their dreams.

Relationship experts and magazine surveys alike tell us that most couples fight about the same four issues: money, in-laws, problems with the children, and sex. But whether the issue is a major one or minor (like where silverware should be placed), the issue itself remains insignificant compared to the way couples talk to each other, which points to a much deeper problem lurking below the surface of their arguments.

In fact, in practically all quarrels between two people in an intimate relationship, whether they are married or not, straight or gay, they are struggling with two basic

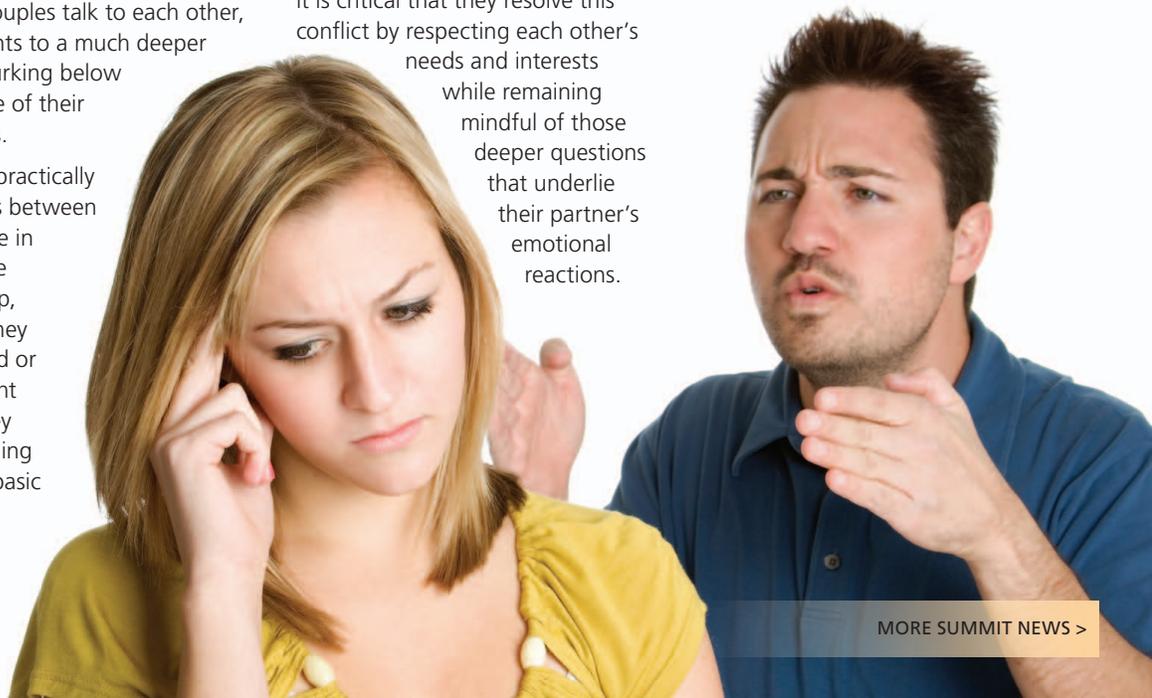
questions: *How important am I to you? Will you be there for me when I really need you?* In other words, am I at the top of your A-list, and do you have my back? When they can no longer positively answer these two questions, an emotional tsunami floods their brains, making it virtually impossible to resolve even the most insignificant (surface) issues.

Of course, the crux of the problem lies in each person’s *perception* of what it means to feel and show their partner how important they are to them and if they will be there for them. The way that each person answers these questions is strongly influenced by their gender, family history and traditions, childhood wounds, and unique personality — just to name a few differences. So it is not wrong for him to want to relax by watching football with his buddies on Sunday afternoon after a long week at work, nor is it wrong for her to want to spend the afternoon together attending a birthday party for her niece. But it is critical that they resolve this conflict by respecting each other’s needs and interests

while remaining mindful of those deeper questions that underlie their partner’s emotional reactions.

So the next time you find yourself stuck in a repetitive argument with your partner that brings out intense reactions from either or both of you, consider that you are really arguing about how important you are to each other and/or whether your partner will be their for you when you need them. Instead of reacting defensively and becoming critical of your partner, take the risk to become more vulnerable by sharing your desire to feel more important to your partner and consider that they are fighting for the same thing. But if your arguments deteriorate into destructive battles that leave you feeling alienated from your partner for long periods, consider seeking couples therapy. ■

Jeffrey L. Santee, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist with advanced training in cognitive psychology and behavioral medicine. In addition to his work in men’s and marital issues, he specializes in the treatment of depression, anxiety disorders, and stress-related health problems.



Q&A

Q My fiancé and I are getting married soon. We get along well, but a friend suggested we might want to consider premarital counseling. Could this be helpful?

A In a word, **yes**. Premarital counseling is a type of therapy that provides a proactive approach to head off possible issues that may arise later in the marriage.

Premarital counseling can definitely be a good idea for a number of reasons. First, it can help open up discussion on some potentially difficult topics such as finances, sex, and future goals. Often, couples are not sure how to broach certain subjects for fear of upsetting their partner. Having a mediator assures that the discussion will remain respectful and productive. In addition, partners will have an opportunity to clarify their own views on particular issues through honest dialogue.

Premarital counseling can help couples learn how to deal effectively with conflict. Partners have different backgrounds and different views and are bound to disagree. Learning how to approach conflict is a much-needed skill that can greatly improve any relationship.

Premarital counseling can be a great investment in the future of your marriage! ■

Lisa Hopkins, N.C.C., L.C.P.C., C.A.D.C., P.C.G.C., enjoys working with couples, families, and individuals.

Mood Disorders Impact Relationships

RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS CAN result from unhealthy interactions between two people growing apart, but this is not always the case. In fact, many psychiatric illnesses can include symptoms that have a detrimental effect on one's relationships. Depression, for example, often includes a low or irritable mood, decreased interest in activities, sleep and appetite changes, inattention, restlessness or slowed movements, fatigue, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, or even thoughts of suicide. These can lead to a decrease in initiative, social interactions, or even sexual desire, causing a partner to feel rejected or disappointed. Bipolar mania, on the other hand, can include drastic mood changes, irritability, impulsivity, anger, poor judgment, excessive spending, increased interest in sex and inflated feelings of self-worth. All of these moods and behaviors stress relationships.

Anyone struggling with these problems should get professional diagnosis and treatment. Often my patients comment that if their relationship problems would improve, their mood problems would resolve. However, the situation is often far more complex, and depressive symptoms are almost always a contributing factor. Although stressful relationships may precipitate a mood disorder, it is equally possible that the mood disorder is contributing to the relationship stress. It is easier to work on a relationship when you feel better both emotionally and physically. Mood disorders are biological in nature, and treatment may require prescription medications, psychotherapy or a combination of both.

If your partner is struggling with a mood disorder, don't pretend that things are fine. It is essential

to communicate your concerns openly and honestly. A supportive and non-accusatory tone can go a long way in helping your partner hear how the symptoms affect you both. Remember, a depressed partner can't just "snap out of it." By learning more about the illness, you can work together to develop a plan to address these problems.

Living with someone with a mood disorder is emotionally difficult. The longer a non-depressed partner lives with a depressed partner, the higher his or her own risk for depression. So take care of yourself as well. Although mood disorders are chronic illnesses, effective treatment can allow a person to return to their normal work or home life and can ultimately have a beneficial effect on all of one's relationships. ■

Anna Mackender, M.D., enjoys treating patients with depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety and ADHD.

How To Decide When a Marriage Must End

NO ONE DREAMS OF GROWING up, having a family and getting a divorce. For most of us, contemplating the "Big D" is extremely painful.

I believe there are ways to know when you have tried all avenues for improvement in a relationship before opting for divorce.

Some issues in marriage will definitely *not* improve by waiting for change. One of the most damaging is physical violence. Experience shows that once domestic battery begins, it is likely to escalate. Usually there is a cycle of violence that includes a violent altercation, then a "honeymoon" phase, including sorrow and remorse on the part of the abuser. But eventually tension builds up, and the abuse occurs again, often more violently. These relationships can sometimes be salvaged, but only with intensive professional treatment and only if both partners are willing to work hard to change

destructive patterns. Medication may also be needed.

Repetitive infidelity is another problem that will not often resolve without professional help. Often people who engage in serial relationships have addictive problems that need extensive support and recovery programs in order to change.

A third issue that is difficult to address without help is severe mental illness. For those married to mentally ill partners who refuse to seek treatment, divorce or legal separation may be the lesser of evils.

In addition to these fairly clear-cut reasons to contemplate separation or divorce, other circumstances, such as emotional abandonment, do not fit into any particular category. When at a marital impasse, go very slowly, and fully examine the relationship before choosing to end it.

Often people believe they must leave their marriage because they no longer have feelings for their partner. But this is not necessarily a sign that the marriage is dead. No marriage sustains forever the strong feelings of the first few years. With work, feelings can be restored. Resolving underlying anger or learning a partner's love language can often revive warm feelings that were thought to have disappeared. Sometimes underlying conflicts from one's family of origin can disrupt a marriage, and the relationship can be healed if the partners do some individual therapy.

Though some marriages may be unsalvageable, many more could be saved if enough time and effort are taken to work through the issues in therapy. ■

Sharon Beck, R.N., L.C.S.W., works with marriages, blended families, and divorce recovery.