

Marriage

Conflict

Marriage involves conflict. It's bound to, as it's about two people seeing things from their own individual point of view. Some couples say they don't argue. However, is that because they've learned how to deal with conflict without arguing?

"Never go to sleep on a row. You won't sleep and it will still be there in the morning!", Jan, married 46 years.

Some tools to help you navigate through the inevitable conflicts:

A. What is the real issue?

When a conflict arises, can you recognise what the real issue is? An argument sometimes fails to address the real issue.

"It's important to share feelings honestly and openly as situations arise without bottling them up until they become issues", Penny, married 12 years.

Derek and Sarah have been married for two years, and have a baby of six months. Sarah has recently been shouting at Derek when he forgets to tidy up behind him. The real issue, though, is that she is tired, and feels she is juggling house and baby, whilst Derek is out all day. One day they have a big argument because Sarah is fed up picking up Derek's socks on the bedroom floor.

However, when they are able to discuss the real issue, Sarah is able to talk about her feelings to Derek. She tells him she feels exhausted, and needs more support. As a result, they decide to hire a cleaner, and Derek realises he needs to come home earlier from work to support Sarah and the baby.

So, identify the **issue** wherever possible.

"What makes a great marriage? Saying sorry, as quickly and meaningfully as possible", Andi, married 14 years.

"Sorry seems to be the hardest word", Elton John.

B. Learning to apologise

An old advertising campaign said "Love means never having to say you're sorry." That's not true! A good marriage is all about taking responsibility for when you say or do something wrong, or admitting you were wrong in an argument (ouch!). It is never a sign of weakness, only strength, when you can admit that you were wrong, and apologise. Apologising often has the effect of deflating an argument too.

B. Forgiving each other

Forgiveness is a huge subject. It can take a long time to forgive someone, sometimes taking years. For most people, this is a process, not an event.

"...do not let the sun go down on your anger", The Bible.

The Christian view is that people need to forgive each other because *God has forgiven us*. We can live as free people, because God has chosen to overlook the many wrongdoings, we have done to him and others. Therefore, we need to apply that *ability to let go* to our relationships too.

It goes in the face of society to act this way, because anger is seen as a fundamental right. Anger is a good emotion when used for the right things, and that includes things which are done unjustly to us, or others. However, it can easily become something which can cripple our relationships if it is not well-managed.

Forgiveness has often been misunderstood. Basically, forgiveness means accepting that someone else may be at fault, but we choose not to hold it against them. This is where past grievances often get dragged into conflicts, because we've not learned how to let go of them.

Forgiveness though, never says "it doesn't matter". It does. Whatever was done to us is wrong and we should never push it aside. If we are wounded, or hurt as a result of what was done to us, we need to attend to those wounds.

- **Forgiveness does not destroy our memory.** We may have painful memories which revisit us, even after forgiving someone.
- **Forgiveness does not remove all consequences of wrongdoing.** Someone who has stolen money may apologise, but the money is still gone.
- **Forgiveness does not rebuild trust.** James and Natasha have been married for ten years, and James has confessed to having an affair. Whilst they are receiving counselling, and Natasha says she has forgiven James, it will take time for their relationship to rebuild. Reconciliation is not automatic.

“If you can learn to apologise and forgive, you will have two of the major elements for building a successful marriage.” *Things I Wish I’d Known Before We Got Married*, by Gary Chapman.

For discussion:

- How hard is it for you to say sorry and to forgive?
- Can you think of conflicts where you discussed the issue, rather than the conflict? If not, why not?
- Does reading any of this shed new light on ways you could handle conflict in the future?

Credit: Some of the content and ideas used in this document were inspired by Gary Chapman’s book ‘Things I Wish I’d Known Before I Got Married’.