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Conflict: A Fact of Life, Stimulus for Change!

What is your perspective on conflict? Is it bad? Something to be avoided? An opportunity to win or be “one up?” Most conflict is not between a right and a wrong position, but two differing points of view! All relationships have differences and disagreements and conflict happens when two people want different things. Studies show the *amount* of disagreements is not related to marital happiness as much as *how* they are handled. Happy couples do not avoid disagreements; they resolve them while remaining respectful of each other, thereby strengthening their relationship. This can be managing the conflict, or finding solutions. The key in conflict is whether tension and moods escalate, or they lead to solutions and to resolution. Conflict can actually lead to change and personal growth.

John Gottman, a respected psychologist, says “a lasting marriage results from a couple’s ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship.” The *lack of conflict* does not necessarily mean a healthy marriage. He believes relationships *grow* by reconciling differences. It is as if the working through the issues and events we experience actually strengthen relationships. There is a potential for conflict whenever we interact with others. We are all uniquely created and are different- just look at how complex and distinctive the characteristics are between a male and a female. Different, yet complimentary all at the same time.

Attitude appears to be foundational in healthy relationships. Do I see myself in a position of superiority where only I have rights, ideas feelings and beliefs? Do I see myself as inferior? When we see ourselves and our partners as *equals* we can be more open, honest, respectful and better able to meet their needs and desires. Friesen & Friesen believe attitude is an important component of conflict management; that *accepting and understanding* your partner along with a *willingness to express* yourself in a loving and caring manner are essential in long term committed relationships. As understanding is vital, they use a concept that helps develop empathy and consideration for others and rejects defensiveness.

There are generally two methods we regularly use to respond to conflict or even change. One of these is to respond to *protect ourselves* in order to *avoid pain and rejection*. This response of protection usually leads to behaviors of blaming, defending, controlling and/or withdrawing. All of these actions defeat the purpose of understanding- hearing the other person and finding solutions. They are isolating types of behavior. The other way we respond, and one we use less often, is responding to *discover more about yourself and others*. This is an attitude of understanding, openness to change and listening. And yes, there is *risk* involved. Making a determined decision to find out more, and experience more, can mean changes you did not anticipate in your own attitude, understanding and thinking. To discover and understand more, ask questions: Why am I upset? What are my issues? What do I really want? Why is my partner upset? What might be their issues? What might they want?

Remaining calm, being non defensive, respecting and validating your partner and showing vulnerability can be difficult. But they can be practiced, learned and become a way of enhancing the satisfaction in relationships by managing conflict well. Commitment to changing how you see yourself, your partner and the relationship as a whole may bring about change. How you listen and how you react or respond are key to handling the certainty of conflict in everyday relationships.

Blessings,

Mike