

LET YOUR PARTNER INFLUENCE YOU

In this series we have discussed several keys to successful marriage (the 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative interactions; the maintaining of an up to date “Love Map” of your spouse’s hopes, concerns, etc.; and the need to nurture mutual Fondness and Admiration). Today we will discuss two ways that couples can better manage conflicts that arise in their relationship, and as a result work toward developing a more mutually satisfying marriage.

These two methods of better managing conflict are “softened startups” and “accepting influence.” It is important to note here that conflict itself is not a bad thing, but simply the experience of ordinary differences between spouses. Dealing with differences in opinions, goals, interests, desires, etc., is a normal part of any marital relationship. What matters is how the married couple handles the differences. The use of “softened startups” and the “accepting of influence” help provide for the necessary give and take needed in a marriage and serve to honor the differences one’s partner brings to the marriage.

In his book, *The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work*, John Gottman, Ph.D., discusses the use of “harsh startups” and “failure to accept influence.” He notes that the use of “harsh startups” is a tendency to begin a discussion with the use of harsh, critical tones, and “failure to accept influence” as an independent habit of mind which keeps you from expressing agreement with at least part of what your spouse is asking for.

Dr. Gottman suggests that it is usually the wife who engages in the use of “harsh startups.” He indicates that the use of “harsh startups” shuts down the possibility of discussion as they tend to evoke strong negative reactions, such as criticism, defensiveness, contempt, or emotional withdrawal. The remedy, as with all bad habits, is to do something different, to acquire the use of “softened startups.” It is of interest to note that the way a discussion starts will likely result in its ending in the same way. An example of “harsh startup” Dr. Gottman gives is:

You may want your spouse to express more affection and you bring up the issue. A “harsh startup” would be: “You never touch me! You come from a family of cold people!” A softened startup would be: “I loved it when you kissed me the other day in the kitchen. You are a natural born kisser. Would you please do more of that?” When wives practice the softened startup the results will be positive.

In his discussion of “failure to accept influence” Professor Gottman notes that it is usually the husband who has the annoying and potentially destructive habit of always wanting to be one up. In fact, his research shows that only 35 percent of men tend to regularly accept the influence of their wives in resolving their differences.

So, what is this matter of “accepting influence?” It is not a matter of just responding “Yes dear!”, but rather it is coming to recognize and accept what your wife has to say. It is about honoring one’s wife as an equal member of the team. Accepting influence is about engaging in give and take, being open to finding a common ground on issues, and letting your wife know that her opinion counts. Dr. Gottman offers the following example of the bad habit of not accepting influence:

Wife: “Do you have to work on Thursday night? My mother is coming that weekend and I need your help to get things ready.”

Husband: “What do you want me to do? Always be agreeable to you? My plans are set and I’m not changing them.”

Whereas an example Gottman offers of the husband accepting influence is: “Sure, I can look into changing that to Sunday. Would Sunday night be okay, since she leaves after breakfast?”

Dr. Gottman encourages both spouses to “yield to win” and to be reasonable with each other. When you accept your spouse’s influence you strengthen the relationship and build a positive balance in your spouse’s emotional bank account and both walk away feeling honored.

Too often couples discuss areas of difference between them, using the same bad habits they used the time before. And too, couples all too often get stuck in a habit of waiting for the other spouse to change. The good news, however, is that bad habits can be changed, and if the one person changes, the other one will also. The use of “softened startups” and the “accepting of influence” can lead to a better handling of discussions involving differences of opinion and help strengthen a life-long friendship of honor and mutual respect. A “softened startup” and the accepting of influence will be a big help in achieving the goal of successful marriage. This is obviously part of a Christian Marriage in which mutual respect and service are part of the journey.

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