

COUPLE TALK*Communicating with Your Partner***Resolving Conflict, Winning at Love****Ted G. Futris, Ph.D., Family Life State Specialist**

The way we handle problems, more than the problems themselves, can often be the problem. Conflict is a natural, inevitable part of human relationships. People in a relationship are going to have differences, and relations will not always be harmonious. And as partners become closer, these differences inevitably cause some disagreements. However, the fact that conflict exists in intimate relationships does not necessarily mean that love is absent. In fact, conflict can be beneficial to a relationship if it is handled and resolved in a healthy way.

When you think about conflict, what images come to mind? Often, the first stumbling block to resolving conflict is a faulty perception of conflict itself. When couples see conflict as negative, and therefore avoid talking about it, their relationship suffers. According to a national survey of 21,501 married couples, David and Amy Olson, authors of *Empowering Couples* (www.lifeinnovations.com), found the five most common stumbling blocks to resolving conflict are:

- Disagreeing on the issue of who is responsible for a given problem.
- Feeling that differences never seem to get resolved.
- Going out of the way to avoid conflict with each other.
- Differing about the best way to solve disagreements.
- Having huge disputes over unimportant issues.

What distinguishes a happy couple from an unhappy couple? Based on the same national survey, the most important difference was whether the partners feel understood when discussing problems. Not only do happy couples feel understood, but they also feel able to share feelings and opinions during disagreements. Happy couples are also much more likely to agree that their disagree-

ments get resolved and that they have similar ideas about how to resolve conflicts.

How does a couple constructively resolve conflict? Conflict management is a skill that anyone can acquire. Here are a few suggestions for improving your ability to resolve conflict:

- View conflict as a normal part of a close relationship.
- Openly listen to the concerns of your partner.
 - Never negotiate in moments of anger. Take some time to compose yourself so that you will be able to rationally discuss the issue.
 - When negotiating, do not bring up past issues. Focus on the relevant and current issues and express both positive and negative feelings.
- Do not blame each other, but focus on the problem. Remember that everyone involved contributes in some way.

Because the approach you use to resolve conflict will affect the outcome, the more constructive your approach the greater the possibility of success. The result of constructive conflict resolution is often increased intimacy and trust in each other and your relationship.

Adapted from Dr. David H. Olson's 2003 article, "Conflict Resolution Issues for Couples" for Family Information Services, Minneapolis, MN.

ACTIVITY

What are your couple strengths when it comes to resolving conflict? Set aside some time with your partner to talk about the following questions. Explore ways to turn areas of disagreement into strengths.

- Are you able to compromise when necessary?
- Do you ignore issues that may cause conflict?
- Do you allow minor issues to become major problems?
- Do you have different ways of dealing with issues?
- Are you generally able to work through issues and resolve them?