Article Side

Managing Conflict with Your Spouse by Francis Portisford

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One of the cruelest truths of the world is that no matter how much you love someone, spend long enough in their company and you will eventually argue. Sometimes these arguments are little more than moments of frustration that are quickly glossed over and forgotten about. In other cases, however, arguments can become more deeply entrenched.

If the latter description fits your marital situation, do not despair. Almost everyone will have been through a similar situation at some point in their lives, whether it is with a long-term partner, or friend, or even family member. The important thing is to recognise that there are many ways of managing conflict that can help to prevent everyday disagreements from leading to a relationship breakdown.

First and foremost, take the time to listen to the concerns of your other half. Don't just sit there and let their words wash over you: listen actively to what they have to say. Often this is enough to reveal a solution to the problem - for example, if Spouse A is concerned that Spouse B is spending too much time and energy on work (and not enough on domestic life), then a true listener would take this on board and endeavour to redress the balance between domestic and working life. This in turn could resolve the problem.

Unfortunately, sometimes listening and acting on what your partner seems to want is not enough, and in these cases problems can quickly escalate. Communication is key in maintaining a healthy relationship of any kind, so breaking down the barriers between what you perceive to be the problem and what the problem truly is cannot be avoided if the problem is to be resolved. In the home/work balance example above, perhaps the true cause for concern is that Spouse A is concerned that Spouse B may be having an affair - which explains the long working hours. Simply spending more time at home may not be enough to convince Spouse A that this is not the case, so it is crucial that Spouse A admits that the problem is actually a matter of trust if a way forward is to be found. This sort of critical self-examination can often be an uncomfortable process, but hang in there - it will pay dividends in the future.

For some couples, there really is no alternative but to seek professional help or watch the relationship fall apart. Whilst there is the legal option - i.e. using legal representatives to reach a divorce settlement - any committed couple will want to try less serious alternatives before resorting to this. Just as a business can use workplace mediation to facilitate the resolution of a conflict between two employees, so a couple can involve an independent professional with the relevant mediation training to help them solve their personal problems.

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